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No. ____

IN THE

Supreme Court of the United States

STATE OF MISSOURI,
Petitioner,

v.

MIGUEL VACA,
Respondent.

On Petition For a Writ of Certiorari
To the Supreme Court of Missouri

PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Can a state court of last resort effectively create a new category of per se prejudice for ineffective assistance of counsel by ordering a new penalty phase trial due to counsel's failure to consider presenting mental health evidence that the court admitted was as likely to have harmed the defendant as to have helped him?

2. Can a state court of last resort disregard the admonition of *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668 (1984), that the idiosyncrasies of the particular decisionmaker are not to be considered in the prejudice inquiry of an ineffective assistance of counsel claim, and find that the omission of mental health evidence before the particular jury that sat in the defendant's sentencing hearing undermined confidence in the outcome of that sentencing hearing?

PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDING

Petitioner, State of Missouri, was the respondent below; respondent, Miguel Vaca, was the appellant.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED i

PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDINGS ii

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES v

OPINIONS BELOW 1

JURISDICTION 1

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS INVOLVED 1

STATEMENT OF THE CASE 2

REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION 8

1. The Missouri Supreme Court's opinion continues a recent trend of effectively expanding the scope of the per se prejudice rule established in *United States v. Cronic* by granting relief on a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel for failure to present evidence without requiring a showing of a reasonable probability of a different result had the evidence been presented 8

2. The Missouri Supreme Court's opinion conflicts with decisions from other courts that have considered the prejudicial effect of not presenting "double-edged" mental health evidence 17

3. The Missouri Supreme Court's opinion conflicts with the Court's opinion in *Strickland v. Washington* by considering the particular idiosyncracies of the jury in evaluating prejudice from counsel's performance 22

4. The Missouri Supreme Court has set a lower bar for vacating non-capital sentences than exists for vacating capital sentences and could create precedent in an undeveloped area of law 24

CONCLUSION 27

APPENDIX

The Missouri Supreme Court's

June 15, 2010 Opinion in *Vaca v. State* A1

Dissenting Opinion in *Vaca v. State* A15

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

CASES

Barnes v. Thompson, 58 F.3d 971 (4th Cir. 1995)... 19

Bell v. Cone, 535 U.S. 685 (2002)..... 11

Branch v. State, 882 So. 2d 36 (Miss. 2004)..... 14

Brawner v. State, 947 So. 2d 254 (Miss. 2006)..... 14

Chavez v. State, 12 So. 2d 199 (Fla. 2009)..... 15

Commonwealth v. Cousin, 888 A.2d 710 (Pa. 2005) 15

Davis v. Executive Dir. Dept. of Corr., 100 F.3d 750 (10th Cir. 1996)..... 20

Davis v. Vannata, 438 F.3d 707 (7th Cir. 2006)..... 13

Dowthitt v. Johnson, 230 F.3d 733 (5th Cir. 2000) 20

Evans v. State, 946 So. 2d 1 (Fla. 2006)..... 21

Ex parte McFarland, 163 S.W.3d 743 (Tex. Crim. App. (2005)..... 14

Florida v. Nixon, 543 U.S. 175 (2004)..... 11

Glover v. Miro, 262 F.3d 268 (4th Cir. 2001)..... 12, 15

Glover v. United States, 531 U.S. 198 (2000)..... 25

Gochicoa v. Johnson, 238 F.3d 278 (5th Cir. 2000). 13

Gregg v. Georgia, 428 U.S. 153 (1976)..... 24

In re Washington, 838 A.2d 87 (Vt. 2003)..... 21

Johnson v. Cockrell, 301 F.3d 234 (5th Cir. 2002) . 12, 13

King v. Kemna, 266 F.3d 816 (8th Cir. 2001).... 20, 21

Mickens v. Taylor, 535 U.S. 162 (2001) 10

Moss v. Hofbauer, 286 F.3d 851 (6th Cir. 2001)..... 13

Patrasso v. Nelson, 121 F.3d 297 (7th Cir. 1997).... 13

People v. Frazier, 733 N.W.2d 713 (Mich. 2007)..... 14

People v. Gacy, 530 N.E. 2d 1340 (Ill. 1988)..... 21

Ransom v. Johnson, 126 F.3d 716 (5th Cir. 1997) .. 20

Roitaille v. State, 971 So. 2d 43 (Ala. Crim. App. 2005)..... 21

Ryan v. Palmateer, 108 P.3d 1127 (Or. 2005)..... 14

Schlup v. Delo, 513 U.S. 298 (1995)..... 17

State v. Kenley, 952 S.W.2d 250 (Mo. 1997) 7, 19

State v. Link, 25 S.W.3d 136 (Mo. 2000)..... 19

State v. Moore, 638 N.W.2d 735 (Iowa 2002)..... 15

State v. Vaca, 204 S.W.3d 754 (Mo. Ct. App. 2006) 5 n.1

Strickland v. Washington, 466 U.S. 668 (1984) 9, 10, 22, 23, 25

United States v. Cronic, 466 U.S. 648 (1984) 10

United States v. Theodore, 468 F.3d 52 (1st Cir. 2006) 13

Vaca v. State, 314 S.W.3d 331 (Mo. 2010) 6

Vaca v. State, 2009 WL 3254560 (Mo. Ct. App., Oct. 13, 2009) 5

Walker v. State, 892 A.2d 547 (Md. 2006) 15

Willacy v. State, 967 So. 2d 131 (Fla. 2007) 21

Williams v. State, 254 S.W.3d 70 (Mo. Ct. App. 2008) 16

Wong v. Belmontes, 130 S. Ct. 383 (2009) 18, 25

STATUTES

28 U.S.C. § 1257(a) 1

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 557.036 (Cum. Supp. 2003) 3, 4, 25 n.3

Mo. Rev. Stat. § 558.019 (Cum. Supp. 2003) 25 n.3

OTHER AUTHORITIES

Carissa Byrne Hessick, *Ineffective Assistance at Sentencing*, 50 B.C. L. Rev. 1069 (2009) 24, 25, 25 n.3

Note, *Prejudice and Remedies: Establishing a Comprehensive Framework for Ineffective Assistance Length-of-Sentence Claims*, 199 Harv. L. Rev. 2143 (2006) 23

OPINIONS BELOW

The Missouri Supreme Court's opinion reversing the trial court's judgment, filed June 15, 2010, and reported at 314 S.W.3d 331 (Mo. 2010), is re-printed in the Appendix ("App.") at A1-A14. The dissenting opinion is reprinted in the appendix at A15-A18.

JURISDICTION

The Supreme Court of Missouri entered its judgment on June 15, 2010. The jurisdiction of the Court is invoked under 28 U.S.C. § 1257(a).

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS INVOLVED

Constitution of the United States, Amendment VI:

> In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right . . . to have the assistance of counsel for his defence.

Constitution of the United States, Amendment XIV:

> ... No state shall . . . deprive any person of life, liberty or property without due process of law, nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Respondent Miguel Vaca was convicted of numerous charges arising from a series of crimes in late 2002. Vaca used a handgun to rob two businesses and to abduct a woman from a child's birthday party in his own apartment complex. Vaca fired the gun into the ceiling during one of the robberies and he shot at a bystander during the abduction at his apartment complex. When police arrested Vaca, he told a detective, "I have some psychological problems and sometimes I do things wrong."

Anthony Cardarella represented Vaca at trial. He retained a licensed psychologist, Dr. Bill Geis, to determine whether there were any mental health issues that might assist Cardarella in presenting a defense or in developing alternative defenses. Dr. Geis interviewed Vaca, reviewed varous records, and administered psychological tests.

Dr. Geis's report showed that Vaca had a long history of violent behavior. When Vaca was eight or nine years old, he stabbed a boy in the back with a pencil after the boy pushed him. In 1986, Vaca was arrested for assault after he punched a woman whom he thought had made a derogatory comment about him. Vaca told Dr. Geis that he got into several fights with men during that time. When Vaca was living with his brother in Arizona, he got into a fight with his nephew and spent the night in jail. Vaca told Dr. Geis that he watched too much violence on television and was worried that it had a negative effect on him.

Vaca told Dr. Geis that he thought he was having a mental breakdown when he came to the jail. Vaca reported "seeing things and seeing people burning and trying to pull me into this." He said that he was having flashbacks to incidents from his 20's of being slapped, beaten, and whipped. Vaca said that he was having a lot of nightmares and that he had been hearing voices for many years. Vaca told Dr. Geis that he had been drinking heavily at the time of his arrest and that he did not know what was going on in his mind. Vaca also said that he had stopped taking his psychiatric medication because he was having trouble with his insurance. Dr. Geis concluded that Vaca's impulse control appeared to fluctuate with his psychiatric status.

Dr. Geis diagnosed Vaca with schizophrenia, paranoid type; dysthymia, early onset; post-traumatic stress disorder; and alcohol abuse. The testing showed that Vaca's IQ scores were in the borderline range of intelligence, and were consistent with low-functioning, non-mentally retarded individuals.

Vaca was tried in December 2004 under Missouri's bifurcated trial procedure. Mo. Rev. Stat. § 557.036 (Cum. Supp. 2003). That statute provides that trials will be conducted in two stages, with the jury deciding guilt or innocence in the first stage and, if the first stage results in a guilty verdict, assessing and declaring punishment in the second stage. *Id.* In that second stage, both the state and the defendant can present evidence supporting or mitigating punishment. *Id.* Such evidence may include, within the discretion of the court, evidence concerning the impact of the crime upon the victim, the victim's family, and others; the nature and circumstances of the offense; and the history and

character of the defendant. *Id.* The court has the final authority to impose sentence, but cannot impose a sentence that exceeds the jury's recommendation. *Id.*

Cardarella did not call Dr. Geis to testify, or attempt to enter his report into evidence, at either the guilt or sentencing phases of trial. Vaca presented testimony from his father at the sentencing phase of the trial. He testified that he and Vaca's mother had only visited Vaca twice in jail.

The jury sent four questions to the court during its guilt phase deliberations:

1) Where has [Vaca] been since arrested 11-2-2002(?)
2) Was [he] given psychological testing(?)
3) Had he been compliant with medications before arrest(?)
4) Is he currently on meds(?)

The court did not answer any of the questions.

The jury found Vaca guilty on all counts. The jury recommended sentences of life and thirty years imprisonment respectively on the two counts of robbery in the first degree, fifteen years imprisonment for attempted robbery in the first degree, seven years imprisonment for assault in the first degree, and sentences of ten, ten, and thirty years respectively on each count of armed criminal action.

After the conviction and sentence were affirmed on direct appeal,[1] Vaca filed a motion for postconviction relief under Missouri Supreme Court Rule 29.15. The motion alleged, in pertinent part, that trial counsel Cardarella provided ineffective assistance of counsel by failing to call Dr. Geis to testify at the sentencing phase of the trial. An evidentiary hearing was held on July 12, 2007. Both Cardarella and Dr. Geis testified that they could not specifically recall discussing Dr. Geis's report, but both men were certain they did have such a discussion. Dr. Geis could not specifically recall whether he and Cardarella discussed the possibility of his testifying at the sentencing phase of the trial.

Cardarella said that he did not give any consideration to having Dr. Geis testify in the sentencing phase. Cardarella testified that he could not recall a strategic reason for not calling Dr. Geis at sentencing. Cardarella said that he did call some of Vaca's relatives during the guilt phase in order to elicit testimony about Vaca's mental issues and disability. Cardarella wanted the jury to conclude from that testimony that Vaca could not be responsible for the robberies.

The motion court denied the claim for relief raised in the postconviction motion. The Missouri Court of Appeals, Western District, affirmed the motion court's judgment in a five-to-four *en banc* opinion. *Vaca v. State*, 2009 WL 3254560 (Mo. Ct. App., Oct. 13, 2009). The Missouri Supreme Court granted Vaca's application for transfer, and issued a six-to-one opinion on June 15, 2010, granting Vaca's

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[1] *State v. Vaca*, 204 S.W.3d 754 (Mo. Ct. App. 2006).

claim of ineffective assistance of counsel at sentencing and remanding to the trial court for a new sentencing phase trial. *Vaca v. State*, 314 S.W.3d 331, 337 (Mo. 2010); App. at A13-A14.

The court articulated the two-part test for evaluating a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel that this Court set forth in *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668 (1984). App. at A8. The court stated that Vaca was first required to demonstrate that his counsel's representation fell below an objective standard of reasonableness, and that Vaca must then show a reasonable probability that, but for counsel's unprofessional errors, the result of the proceeding would have been different. App. at A8. The court further quoted *Strickland* in observing that a reasonable probability is a probability sufficient to undermine confidence in the outcome of the proceeding. App. at A8. The court found that counsel's failure to consider presenting Dr. Geis's report fell below an objective standard of reasonableness and that, "This omission, in front of *this particular jury*, undermines this Court's confidence in the sentencing phase's outcoome." App. at A12 (emphasis in original). The court then stated:

> While Dr. Geis' testimony and report may have helped Vaca, it may have also embittered the jury. This Court has noted that counsel strategically concluding so has been precisely reasonable in previous sentencing cases. As such, the holding of this case is not that counsel was ineffective for not calling Dr. Geis. Rather, this case rests on the fact that the question of whether to call Dr. Geis was never considered.

App. at A12-A13 (footnotes omitted). In remanding the case for a new sentencing phase trial, the court added the following caveat:

> This Court's holding should not be construed to direct future defense counsel for Vaca to either admit or omit Dr. Geis' testimony during his new sentencing phase. Rather, what is required is that future counsel give due consideration to the question before making a strategic choice.

App. at A13.

Judge Fischer dissented from the majority opinion, stating that it "strays from the well-settled proposition that *Strickland* prejudice cannot be proven by mere speculation." App. at A15 (footnote omitted). The dissent found that the principal opinion's conclusion that Dr. Geis's testimony may have helped Vaca or may have hurt him was admittedly speculative. App. at A15. The dissent stated that prejudice must be definite and identifiable to sustain a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel, and noted that the court had previously rejected claims that counsel was ineffective for failing to put on mental health testimony, because the effect of that testimony on the outcome was speculative. App. at A16 (citing *State v. Kenley*, 952 S.W.2d 250 (Mo. 1997)).

REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION

1. The Missouri Supreme Court's opinion continues a recent trend of effectively expanding the scope of the per se prejudice rule established in *United States v. Cronic* by granting relief on a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel for failure to present evidence without requiring a showing of a reasonable probability of a different result had the evidence been presented.

While the Missouri Supreme Court cited *Strickland v. Washington's* performance and prejudice test to resolve Vaca's claim of ineffective assistance of counsel, the court did not actually apply it. Instead, it opened the door to an expansion of the limited rule of per se prejudice announced in *United States v. Cronic*. The *Vaca* decision is just the latest example of the Missouri Supreme Court's willingness to excuse defendants from actually demonstrating prejudice when counsel has failed to elicit expert testimony about that defendant's mental health issues. The Missouri Supreme Court's approach is an unwarranted expansion of *Cronic's* limited categories of exceptions to *Strickland's* prejudice requirement and is contrary to the narrow application of *Cronic* by this Court, the United States courts of appeals, and other state courts of last resort. If the Missouri Supreme Court is allowed to take this approach to mental health evidence, there will be no discernable end to the types of ineffective assistance claims that might also be deemed worthy of a presumption of prejudice in the future. The boundaries of the per se prejudice rule will be defined solely by the state

court's sensitivities and perceptions about the importance of certain types of evidence.

The Missouri Supreme Court's approach also presents practical problems. By not requiring proof that counsel's failure to present mental health evidence created a reasonable likelihood of a different result, and by not requiring counsel to present mental health evidence on remand, the Missouri Supreme Court is permitting new trials to be conducted on the same evidence and theories that were presented in the original trial. Scarce and valuable judicial resources will thus be wasted on unnecessary retrials. This has already happened in one case. It very well may happen in *Vaca's* case and could continue to happen in future cases – all in the name of federal constitutional rights.

a. Strickland and Cronic standards.

Strickland set forth a two-part test for determining whether a conviction should be reversed because the defendant received ineffective assistance of counsel at trial. *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668, 687 (1984). First, the defendant must show that counsel's performance was deficient. *Id.* Second, the defendant must show that the deficient performance prejudiced the defense. *Id.* To establish prejudice, a defendant must show that there is a reasonable probability that, but for counsel's unprofessional errors, the result of the proceeding would be different. *Id.* at 694. A reasonable probability is a probability sufficient to undermine confidence in the outcome. *Id.* The reasonable probability standard requires more than showing that an error had some conceivable effect on the outcome of a case, but does not require a defendant to show that counsel's

deficient performance more likely than not altered the outcome. *Id.* at 693. Unless a defendant shows both deficient performance and prejudice, it cannot be said that the conviction or sentence resulted from a breakdown in the adversary process that rendered the result unreliable. *Id.* at 687.

On the same day that *Strickland* was decided, this Court also handed down its opinion in *United States v. Cronic*, 466 U.S. 648 (1984). In that case, the Court identified three situations involving the right to counsel where prejudice would be presumed, relieving the defendant of the burden of showing a reasonable probability of a different outcome. *Id.* at 658-59. The first situation is where there is a complete denial of counsel at a critical stage in the proceeding. *Id.* at 659, 662. The second situation is where "counsel entirely fails to subject the prosecution's case to meaningful adversarial testing." *Id.* at 659. And the third situation is when counsel is called upon to render assistance under circumstances where "the likelihood that any lawyer, even a fully competent one, could provide effective assistance is so small that a presumption of prejudice is appropriate without inquiry into the actual conduct of the trial." *Id.* at 659-60.

Since *Cronic* was issued, the Court has taken care to limit its scope. In *Mickens v. Taylor*, the Court clarified that *Cronic* is limited to cases where the magnitude of counsel's error is such that the verdict is almost certain to be unreliable. *Mickens v. Taylor*, 535 U.S. 162, 166 (2001).

In *Bell v. Cone,* this Court could have enlarged one of the *Cronic* exceptions to cover claims similar to those raised by Vaca – that counsel was ineffective

at the sentencing phase of trial by failing to adduce mitigating evidence at sentencing and by waiving closing argument. *Bell v. Cone*, 535 U.S. 685, 692 (2002). The defendant there argued that his claim fell within the second *Cronic* exception – that his attorney failed to subject the prosecutor's case to meaningful adversarial testing. *Id.* at 696. The Court clarified that for that second exception to apply, the attorney's failure to test the prosecutor's case "must be complete." *Id.* at 697. The Court went on to state that counsel's mere failure to contest the prosecution at specific points in the proceeding is a difference "not of degree but of kind," for purposes of distinguishing the rule of *Strickland* from the rule of *Cronic*. *Id.* The Court concluded that counsel's alleged errors of failing to offer mitigating evidence and waiving closing argument "are plainly of the same ilk as other specific attorney errors we have held subject to *Strickland's* performance and prejudice components." *Id.* at 697-98.

The Court also declined to expand the scope of the second *Cronic* exception in *Florida v. Nixon*, 543 U.S. 175 (2004). There, the Court found that a presumption of prejudice should not have been applied based solely on the defendant's failure to provide express consent to trial counsel's strategic decision to concede guilt and concentrate on sparing the defendant from the death sentence. *Id.* at 178-79, 190.

b. The per se prejudice rule has been narrowly construed by lower courts.

Consistent with *Bell v. Cone* and *Florida v. Nixon*, the United States courts of appeals and state courts of last resort have been careful to limit the

application of the per se prejudice rule to the categories identified by this Court. In particular, several circuits have drawn the distinction between *Cronic's* per se rule and *Strickland's* prejudice requirement in terms of whether counsel provided no defense at all, versus bad, even deplorable, assistance.

One of those courts is the Fourth Circuit, which warned against extending the per se prejudice rule to the point that it swallows *Strickland's* actual prejudice rule:

> If we were to broaden the per-se prejudice exception to *Strickland*, we would only add an extra layer of litigiousness to ineffective assistance law. To designate certain categories of cases as *Cronic* "constructive denial" cases and others as *Strickland* "deficient performance" cases would promote a new threshold area of debate and complicate the handling of this most common area of contention on collateral review.

Glover v. Miro, 262 F.3d 268, 277 (4th Cir. 2001). The court found that a per se prejudice rule did not apply to a claim that counsel had limited time to prepare the defense case and interview alibi witnesses. *Id.* at 278.

The Fifth Circuit has described *Cronic's* per se prejudice rule as applying to "only a very narrow spectrum of cases" where counsel's ineffectiveness was so egregious that the defendant was effectively denied any meaningful assistance at all. *Johnson v. Cockrell*, 301 F.3d 234, 238 (5th Cir. 2002). The court found that while counsel's trial strategy may have

been mistaken, such a "strategic blunder" or "bad lawyering" was insufficient to support a *Cronic* claim of per se prejudice. *Id. See also Gochicoa v. Johnson*, 238 F.3d 278, 285 (5th Cir. 2000) (stating that the critical distinction between *Strickland* and *Cronic* is whether the defendant asserts that he received incompetent counsel or none at all).

The First Circuit has also noted the narrow scope of the per se prejudice rule, stating that even egregious attorney error is subject to *Strickland's* prejudice standard. *United States v. Theodore*, 468 F.3d 52, 56 (1st Cir. 2006). The court found that counsel's efforts on the defendant's behalf during the sentencing phase of trial were "meager," but that a per se presumption of prejudice was not appropriate because counsel had not failed *entirely* to oppose the prosecution. *Id.* at 57.

The Sixth Circuit concluded that the *Strickland* prejudice standard, rather than the *Cronic* presumption of prejudice, applied to a claim that counsel was ineffective for failing to cross-examine key government eyewitnesses. *Moss v. Hofbauer*, 286 F.3d 851, 861 (6th Cir. 2001). The court found that counsel's performance, whether good or bad, was not the equivalent of being physically or mentally absent from trial. *Id.* at 862.

The Seventh Circuit has also rejected attempts to extend *Cronic's* per se prejudice rule to claims involving substandard performance by counsel. *Davis v. Vannata*, 438 F.3d 707, 711-12 (7th Cir. 2006); *Patrasso v. Nelson*, 121 F.3d 297, 302 (7th Cir. 1997).

State courts of last resort have also declined to apply *Cronic's* per se prejudice rule to ordinary claims of deficient performance by counsel.

The Mississippi Supreme Court has found that a per se prejudice rule "is reserved only for those extreme cases in which counsel fails to present any defense." *Branch v. State*, 882 So. 2d 36, 65-66 (Miss. 2004). That court thus found that a defendant was not relieved of his burden of proving prejudice when he alleged various errors by counsel, including a failure to present mitigating evidence at sentencing. *Brawner v. State*, 947 So. 2d 254, 261, 263 (Miss. 2006).

The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals declined to apply *Cronic*'s presumption of prejudice where counsel provided active and zealous advocacy, even though the defendant claimed counsel's advocacy was insufficient. *Ex parte McFarland*, 163 S.W.3d 743, 753 (Tex. Crim. App. 2005).

The Michigan Supreme Court found that *Strickland's* prejudice requirement, rather than *Cronic's* presumption of prejudice, applied to a claim that counsel erred in advising the defendant that he could waive his right to counsel at a police interrogation. *People v. Frazier*, 733 N.W.2d 713, 721 (Mich. 2007).

The Oregon Supreme Court found that a claim of numerous errors by trial counsel did not meet the standard for a presumption of prejudice, even though counsel did make some mistakes in his representtation. *Ryan v. Palmateer*, 108 P.3d 1127, 1133, 1139 (Or. 2005).

The Iowa Supreme Court emphasized the narrow scope of per se ineffectiveness of counsel in finding that such a per se rule did not apply to counsel's failure to insist on a full open court colloquoy in a guilty plea proceeding. *State v. Moore*, 638 N.W.2d 735, 739 (Iowa 2002).

And several courts have held that the per se prejudice rule does not apply to complaints about counsel's strategic and tactical choices. *See, e.g., Chavez v. State*, 12 So. 2d 199, 210-12 (Fla. 2009); *Walker v. State*, 892 A.2d 547, 562-63 (Md. 2006); *Commonwealth v. Cousin*, 888 A.2d 710, 715, 723 (Pa. 2005).

c. Missouri Supreme Court's approach is contrary to the narrow scope of the per se prejudice rule.

While this Court and the courts listed above have been careful to narrowly limit application of the per se prejudice rule, the Missouri Supreme Court has shown a willingness to effectively create a new category of per se prejudice. That new category involves cases where there is some indication that the defendant may have mental health issues, but counsel does not present expert mental health evidence at trial. *Vaca* is only the latest example of the Missouri Supreme Court's openness to mandating new trials in those types of cases on federal constitutional grounds while relieving the defendant of any burden of demonstrating prejudice. That approach implicates the Fourth Circuit's concern (*see* p.12, *supra*) by threatening to expand the per se prejudice rule to the point that it swallows *Strickland's* actual prejudice rule. *Glover*, 262 F.3d at 277. It also ignores the standard adopted and

applied by many courts that limits per se prejudice to a complete failure of advocacy rather than discrete errors in portions of the representation – a standard derived from this Court's statements in *Cronic* and *Mickens*.

The Missouri Supreme Court's approach is also problematic because it has already created practical problems. In a separate case, the court, by denying transfer, let stand an opinion by the Missouri Court of Appeals, Western District, that remanded for a new trial because counsel's failure to prove the defendant's indigence prevented the defendant from obtaining funds to retain an expert to evaluate the defendant's mental state at the time of the offense and his competency to proceed. *Williams v. State*, 254 S.W.3d 70, 83 (Mo. Ct. App. 2008). The Court of Appeals found that the defendant was prejudiced even though he produced no evidence as to what an expert would have found had one been retained or how the expert's assistance would have changed the outcome of the trial. *Id.* at 82-83. In remanding for a new trial, the Court of Appeals did not enter any orders requiring that an expert be retained for that second trial. *Id.* at 83.

And when the case was returned to the trial court on remand, defense counsel informed the court that he had decided not to present any expert testimony on the defendant's mental state after determining that such testimony would not be helpful. The defendant was thus getting a second trial that would consist of the same evidence presented at the first trial. That prompted the State to file a motion to recall the mandate with the Missouri Supreme Court, seeking to have the original conviction reinstated. The court denied that motion.

As a result, the state is being forced to prosecute Williams a second time even though there was no error in the first trial and the second trial will be duplicative of the first. That is at odds with this Court's interest in defining the scope of collateral review in a way that seeks to reasonably conserve scarce judicial resources. *See Schlup v. Delo*, 513 U.S. 298, 324 (1995).

Here, in remanding Vaca's case for a new sentencing hearing, the Missouri Supreme Court explicitly stated that counsel would not be required to present Dr. Geis's testimony, or any other mental health evidence. App. at A13. Instead, counsel need only *consider* whether to present it. App. at A13. Should counsel, after due consideration, decide that the mental health evidence was more likely to be harmful than helpful, the end result would be like that in *Williams*, with the trial court empaneling a new jury to hold a second sentencing hearing that would be nearly identical to the first in terms of the evidence presented. That would be a misuse of judicial resources that are better applied to other cases.

2. The Missouri Supreme Court's opinion conflicts with decisions from other courts that have considered the prejudicial effect of not presenting "double-edged" mental health evidence.

If the Missouri Supreme Court's decision is viewed as actually applying *Strickland's* prejudice prong – i.e., if the opinion is read as holding that there is a reasonable probability that Dr. Geis's testimony would have favorably affected the outcome

of the trial – that holding conflicts with how this Court and other courts have handled claims of failure to present evidence that has the potential to damage the defense case. While most courts have found no prejudice from the failure to present such "double-edged" evidence, the Missouri Supreme Court found prejudice despite an express acknowledgement of the potentially harmful nature of the unpresented mental health evidence.

This Court has addressed how the *Strickland* standard is to be applied to claims that counsel was ineffective for failing to present mitigating evidence at sentencing. *Wong v. Belmontes*, 130 S. Ct. 383, 386 (2009). The Court stated that the defendant had to show a reasonable probability that a competent attorney who was aware of the available mitigating evidence would have introduced it at sentencing, and that had the jury been confronted with the mitigating evidence, there was a reasonable probability that it would have returned with a different sentence. *Id.* *Wong* reversed a decision by the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit that vacated the defendant's sentence on habeas review, after finding that the Court of Appeals failed to apply the *Strickland* prejudice standard. *Id.* at 390-91. And in finding that the defendant was not prejudiced by the failure to present additional mitigating evidence, including mental health evidence, the Court noted that some of the unpresented evidence could have opened the door to allow the state to present evidence that would have been damaging to the defendant's case. *Id.* at 388-89.

The approach taken by the Missouri Supreme Court in *Vaca* (and by sanctioning the state court of

appeals decision in *Williams*) not only conflicts with *Wong*, it represents a retreat from the approach the court has taken in past cases. In *State v. Link*, the court considered a claim that counsel was ineffective for failing to present any psychological experts in the penalty phase of a capital trial. *State v. Link*, 25 S.W.3d 136, 149 (Mo. 2000). The court found that the defendant did not establish prejudice, in part because the psychologist's report contained information that would have verified other expert opinions that the defendant was anti-social, aggressive, and a serial rapist. *Id.* The dissent in *Vaca* noted another prior Missouri Supreme Court opinion that conflicts with *Vaca*. App. at A16. In *State v. Kenley*, the court found no prejudice from defense counsel's failure to obtain additional psychiatric evaluations of a capital defendant because those evaluations could have opened the door to potentially damaging evidence. *State v. Kenley*, 952 S.W.2d 250, 268 (Mo. 1997).

The United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit reached a similar conclusion in finding that a capital defendant was not prejudiced by counsel's failure to present mitigating evidence at sentencing about his mental impairment and his upbringing in a dysfunctional and abusive home. *Barnes v. Thompson*, 58 F.3d 971, 980-81 (4th Cir. 1995). The court concluded that the defendant could not satisfy *Strickland*'s "reasonable probability of a different outcome" standard because the mitigating evidence of mental illness or a history of abuse could have also contained sufficient evidence to support a finding of future dangerousness. *Id.*

Other courts have given similar treatment to claims of failure to present evidence with the potential to be both mitigating and aggravating. The

Fifth Circuit found that a defendant was not prejudiced by counsel's failure to discover evidence of mental illness because "the evidence was double-edged in nature." *Dowthitt v. Johnson*, 230 F.3d 733, 745 (5th Cir. 2000). Accordingly, trial counsel's failure to discover the evidence did not create a probability of a different outcome that was sufficient to undermine confidence in the outcome. *Id.* The Fifth Circuit made a similar finding in rejecting a claim that counsel was ineffective for failing to discover and present penalty phase evidence of the defendant's abusive upbringing as detailed in his welfare file. *Ransom v. Johnson*, 126 F.3d 716, 721-22 (5th Cir. 1997). The court ruled that the defendant did not meet his burden of establishing prejudice because the welfare file also contained evidence that would have been detrimental to his case. *Id.* at 724.

The Tenth Circuit has likewise found no prejudice from the failure to present evidence that would have been at least as damaging to the defendant as it would have been helpful. *Davis v. Executive Dir. Dept. of Corr.*, 100 F.3d 750, 760-61 (10th Cir. 1996). The damaging evidence that would have been revealed to the jury included the defendant's history of violence and his abusive behavior that was fueled by alcohol. *Id.* at 761.

The Eighth Circuit has rejected a claim that counsel was ineffective for failing to present expert testimony at a non-capital sentencing about the defendant's diminished mental capacity. *King v. Kemna*, 266 F.3d 816, 825 (8th Cir. 2001). The court characterized as "rank speculation" the defendant's argument that the evidence might have persuaded the trial court to impose a more lenient sentence. *Id.*

It concluded that the defendant had thus failed to establish *Strickland* prejudice. *Id.*

The Florida Supreme Court has applied the "double-edged sword" standard to reject claims that defense counsel was ineffective for failing to present mitigating evidence of the defendant's mental health background. *See, e.g., Willacy v. State*, 967 So. 2d 131, 144 (Fla. 2007). The court found that prejudice is not established where the evidence not presented "'would likely have been more harmful than helpful.'" *Id.* (quoting *Evans v. State*, 946 So. 2d 1, 13 (Fla. 2006)).

Other state courts of last resort, while not applying the "double-edged sword" standard, have nonetheless rejected claims of ineffectiveness for failure to present potential mitigation evidence where the defendant failed to establish a reasonable probability that the unpresented evidence would have changed the outcome of the sentencing proceeding. *See, e.g., In re Washington*, 838 A.2d 87, 90-91 (Vt. 2003); *Roitaille v. State*, 971 So. 2d 43, 71 (Ala. Crim. App. 2005); *People v. Gacy*, 530 N.E.2d 1340, 1345 (Ill. 1988). In *Gacy*, the Illinois Supreme Court rejected an argument that a defendant was prejudiced because counsel failed to present mitigating evidence that might have convinced the jury to impose a life sentence rather than death. *Id.* The court noted that the defendant's argument was incompatible with the *Strickland* standard of a reasonable probability of a different outcome. *Id.*

3. The Missouri Supreme Court's opinion conflicts with the Court's opinion in *Strickland v. Washington* by considering the particular idiosyncrasies of the jury in evaluating prejudice from counsel's performance.

The Court declared in *Strickland* that the assessment of prejudice in a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel "should not depend on the idiosyncracies of the particular decisionmaker," and that those particular idiosyncrasies "are irrelevant to the prejudice inquiry." *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 695. The Missouri Supreme Court disregarded those admonitions. It noted that the jury sent four questions to the trial court during its guilt phase deliberations, three of which were related to Vaca's mental condition. App. at A5, A11. After finding that counsel was unreasonable for failing to consider using Dr. Geis's report in the sentencing phase of the trial, the Missouri Supreme Court concluded, "This omission, in front of *this particular jury*, undermines this Court's confidence in the sentencing phase's outcome."[2] App. at A12 (emphasis in original). But the Missouri Supreme Court's conclusion conflates the standard for determining the reasonableness of counsel's performance with the standard for measuring prejudice.

The jury questions submitted during guilt phase deliberations could properly be considered in assessing the reasonableness of counsel's failure to consider presenting Dr. Geis's report during the sentencing phase. *See Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 695

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[2] The court then noted in the very next sentence the double-edged nature of Dr. Geis's report and testimony. App. at A12.

(stating that idiosyncrasies of the particular decisionmaker may, to a limited extent, affect the performance inquiry). But the phrase "undermine[s] confidence in the outcome" is part of the definition of prejudice. *See id.* at 694 ("A reasonable probability [that the result of the proceeding would have been different] is a probability sufficient to undermine confidence in the outcome."). The Missouri Supreme Court thus made a finding of prejudice based on the particular idiosyncrasies of the jury that heard Vaca's case. That directly contradicts the *Strickland* standard. In fact, *Strickland* stated that evidence of the actual decision making process, if not part of the record, should not be considered in the prejudice determination. *Id.* at 695. The record in this case contained no evidence of the jury's decision making process in the sentencing phase of the trial. What the Missouri Supreme Court did was take the little evidence that did exist as to the decision making process in the guilt phase and use it to determine prejudice in the sentencing phase.

But those guilt phase questions do not provide any insight into the jury's sentencing decision. There may be cases where statements by the sentencing judge clearly indicate that an error by counsel in either the sentencing or guilt phases of a trial influenced the length of the sentence. *See* Note, *Prejudice and Remedies: Establishing a Comprehensive Framework for Ineffective Assistance Length-of-Sentence Claims*, 119 Harv. L. Rev. 2143, 2151, 2162 n.89 (2006). But no such certainty attaches to the jury questions at issue here. There is no way to know what concerns prompted the questions, how many of the jurors held those concerns, or what the effect on the jury would have been, during sentencing deliberations, had the questions been answered.

The Missouri Supreme Court's reliance on those questions is another example of how it found prejudice based on speculation. This Court should grant certiorari to ensure that reviewing courts consider only proper matters in evaluating prejudice from counsel's performance at sentencing proceedings.

4. The Missouri Supreme Court has set a lower bar for vacating non-capital sentences than exists for vacating capital sentences and could create precedent in an undeveloped area of law.

Of the cases cited in section 2, *supra*, all but *King v. Kemna* and *In re Washington* were capital cases. The Missouri Supreme Court thus vacated a non-capital sentence on grounds that it and other courts, including this Court, have found insufficient to vacate a capital sentence. Besides the conflict with *Strickland* noted above, the Missouri court's opinion is also at odds with this Court's recognition that "death is different," that has led to stringent guidelines for capital sentencing and heightened judicial scrutiny of capital cases in both the state and federal courts. *See Gregg v. Georgia*, 428 U.S. 153 (1976); Carissa Byrne Hessick, *Ineffective Assistance at Sentencing*, 50 B.C. L. Rev.1069, 1071 (2009). The *Vaca* opinion thus anomalously sets a lower bar for vacating non-capital sentences than this Court has set for vacating capital sentences.

And if the Missouri Supreme Court's opinion stands, it will create precedent in an undeveloped area of law. *Strickland* and *Wong* were decided in the context of a claim that counsel provided ineffective

assistance of counsel at the sentencing phase of a capital case. *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 675, 683; *Wong*, 130 S. Ct. at 384. In *Strickland*, the Court expressly declined to consider the role of counsel in non-capital sentencing. *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 686. The Court has subsequently extended the two-prong *Strickland* test to a non-capital case that involved the erroneous application of the then-mandatory Federal Sentencing Guidelines. *Glover v. United States*, 531 U.S. 198, 199-200 (2000). But the Court has not yet addressed the standard to be applied to ineffective assistance claims in a discretionary non-capital sentencing system,[3] and the substantive law of non-capital sentencing remains largely undeveloped. Hessick, *supra*, at 1071.

Because of the undeveloped nature of non-capital sentencing law, the Missouri Supreme Court's opinion in *Vaca* could become a precedent that other courts follow in evaluating claims of ineffective assistance of counsel in non-capital sentencing proceedings. That precedent, if allowed to stand, would eviscerate the prejudice requirement for those claims and would permit sentences to be set aside on little more than speculation. This Court surely did

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[3] The sentencing scheme under which Vaca was sentenced permits the jury to select any sentence within the range of punishment set by statute, and the jury's discretion is not limited by statute or regulation. Mo. Rev. Stat. § 557.036.3 (Cum. Supp. 2003), *see*, Hessick, *supra*, at 1071-72 (defining indeterminate and discretionary sentencing systems). Sentencing guidelines are available to the court when it imposes sentence, but the court retains the discretion to impose a sentence that is either lower or greater than the sentence recommended by the guidelines. Mo. Rev. Stat. § 558.019.7 (Cum. Supp. 2003). The only limit on the court's discretion is that it cannot exceed the sentence declared by the jury. Mo. Rev. Stat. § 557.036.5 (Cum. Supp. 2003).

not intend that non-capital sentences could be so easily vacated when it set a higher bar in *Strickland* for vacating capital sentences.

In addition to the reasons cited above, this Court should grant certiorari to ensure that prejudice in non-capital sentencing proceedings is treated consistently with the principles set out in *Strickland* and its progeny.

CONCLUSION

The Court should grant the petition for a writ of certiorari.

Respectfully submitted,

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September 13, 2010

APPENDIX

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Missouri Supreme Court's
June 15, 2010 Opinion in *Vaca v. State* A1

Dissenting Opinion in *Vaca v. State*
.....A15

[314 S.W.3d 331]

[State Seal]

SUPREME COURT OF MISSOURI
en banc

MIGUEL VACA,	)	
	)	
Appellant,	)	
	)	
v.	)	No. SC90554
	)	
STATE OF MISSOURI,	)	
	)	
Respondent.	)	

APPEAL FROM THE CIRCUIT COURT
OF PLATTE COUNTY

The Honorable Owens Lee Hull, Jr., Judge

Opinion issued June 15, 2010

I. Introduction

A jury convicted Miguel Vaca of various violent felonies arising from a string of armed robberies. Now Vaca asks for post-conviction relief, alleging ineffective assistance of counsel during the sentencing phase of his bifurcated trial. Because Vaca's defense counsel possessed mental health evidence detailing Vaca's mental illness, was apprised of the jury's interest in Vaca's mental condition, and did not consider whether to present such records or testimony to the jury, trial counsel was constitutionally ineffective. Vaca's motion for

post-conviction relief should have been granted in part. The judgment is affirmed in part, reversed in part and remanded.

II. Facts

A. Overview

The factual basis for this Rule 29.15 motion is not disputed. Vaca committed three armed robberies in Platte County in October and November 2002. All three robberies followed the same pattern: Vaca, wearing a ski mask, rode his bicycle from his apartment to nearby locations to commit a robbery with a Taurus revolver. He robbed two businesses - Quality Cleaners and Salon North. He also attempted the robbery of a child's birthday party in his own apartment complex, where he abducted a woman at gunpoint and discharged his revolver at a bystander. From this pattern, police were able to apprehend Vaca and find the bicycle, ski mask, and revolver in addition to other evidence linking him to the robberies.

B. Pretrial Events

When appointed counsel first visited Vaca at the Platte County jail, Dr. Anya, the county jail psychiatrist, had already been attending to Vaca. Dr. Anya suspected that Vaca suffered from mental illness and had prescribed a regimen of Trazadone, Paxil, Clonazepam, and Zyprexa. In response to both this and Vaca's overall demeanor, defense counsel enlisted the services of Dr. Bill Geis, a licensed clinical and forensic psychologist, to determine Vaca's competency to stand trial and whether he had diminished capacity.

Dr. Geis interviewed Vaca and administered various psychological tests. This included the Weschler Adult Intelligence Scale to determine Vaca's cognitive ability. The results showed that Vaca had an overall IQ of 73, which was confirmed by Vaca's school records.

Two tests designed to detect the presence of schizophrenia were also administered. Both came back suggesting a schizophrenic condition. Dr. Geis also reviewed a Social Security Administration determination assessing a disability due in part to schizophrenia, which confirmed his results. Other medical records indicated that Vaca crashed his bicycle in 1988, which resulted in head trauma and a blood clot.

Dr. Geis' report also documented a violent history including incidents in which Vaca stabbed an elementary school classmate with a pencil, punched a woman who allegedly made comments about him and physically fought with family members.

Ulitmately, Dr. Geis' report concluded:

> The defendant has a serious mental disease--schizophrenia--that clearly could have had an impact on his ability to form rational thought and conform his behavior to the expectations of society at the time of the offense. This condition of schizophrenia is corroborated by other medical personnel and appears to have been in existence for most of his life. He also has a condition of low intelligence (borderline intellectual functioning) that could have

affected his ability to understand the impact of his actions.

Neither Dr. Geis nor defense counsel remembers discussing the report with each other, but both testified that it was standard practice to discuss any prepared psychological report. Both had vague recollections of a discussion and ultimately concluded that one must have occurred.

C. The Guilt Phase

Vaca's trial was bifurcated by the newly codified procedure for non-capital cases in sec. 557.036, RSMo Supp. 2008. Although defense counsel was an experienced trial advocate, this was his first bifurcated non-capital trial.

Defense counsel's theory during the guilt phase was complete innocence centered on misidentification by key witnesses. Part of this strategy included counsel eliciting evidence of an uncharged fourth robbery at K.C. Collectibles. Police had recovered fingerprints from that robbery location that did not match Vaca. While police initially grouped this robbery with the three charged robberies, they later excluded it as unrelated.

It is unclear from the record whether counsel intended to introduce Vaca's mental condition to the jury during the guilt phase. However, the State succeeded in preemptively excluding any mental condition evidence before defense counsel's case in chief, arguing that defense counsel failed to notify

the State of his intention to introduce such evidence as required by chapter 552.[1]

The trial record does show that defense counsel tried to tease out testimony about Vaca's mental condition during direct examination of his brother, but was met with sustained objections from the State. At no point during the guilt phase did defense counsel call Dr. Geis or attempt to submit his report into evidence.

During guilt phase deliberations, the jury sent four questions to the court:

> 1) Where has [Vaca] been since arrested 11-2002
> 2) Was [Vaca] given psychological testing
> 3) Had he been compliant with medications before arrest
> 4) Is he currently on meds

The court did not answer any of the questions. The jury returned with guilty verdicts on all the charges against Vaca.

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[1] "Evidence of mental disease or defect excluding responsibility shall not be admissible at trial of the accused unless the accused, at the time of entering such accused's plea to the charge, pleads not guilty by reason of mental disease or defect excluding responsibility, or unless within ten days after a plea of not guilty, or at such later date as the court may for good cause permit, the accused files a written notice of such accused's purpose to rely on such defense." Sec. 552.030.2, RSMo Supp. 2008.

D. Sentencing Phase and Post-Trial Motions

During the sentencing phase of the trial, the State called to the stand the robbery victims. Each testified about how Vaca's actions had adversely affected their lives.

In response, defense counsel called Vaca's father. He testified that he and Vaca's mother had only visited Vaca twice in prison. Dr. Geis was not called during this phase of the trial, nor was his report received into evidence. The jury returned with sentences of life plus 102 years, which the court ordered to run consecutively.

Defense counsel filed a timely Rule 29.11 motion for a new trial. During the subsequent hearing, defense counsel asked the court to set aside the sentences based in part on the pre-sentence investigation report, which counsel argued, "does make mention of a report by Dr. Geis which evidences historical suffering from psychological disorders."[2] The trial court did not modify the jury sentence. On appeal, the conviction and sentence were affirmed. *State v. Vaca*, 204 S.W.3d 754 (Mo. App. 2006)

E. Post-Conviction Proceeding and Appeal

Vaca brought a Rule 29.15 motion for post-conviction relief attacking trial counsel's

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[2] The Pre-sentence Investigation Report is not part of the record on appeal; however, mention of it is made in the transcript, which is part of the record.

effectiveness during the sentence and guilt phase. Defense counsel and Dr. Geis were the only witnesses at the proceeding.

Dr. Geis testified during the Rule 29.15 proceeding that he was available during the sentencing phase to testify and that he would have been able to expand on his report and Vaca's history of mental illness.

Defense counsel also testified during the Rule 29.15 proceeding. Counsel stated that the State's evidence was substantial, that Vaca's conviction was likely, and that he knew that this case would probably be going to the sentencing phase. The following exchange between post-conviction counsel and defense counsel then occurred:

> Q. Okay. Before trial did you give any consideration to calling Dr. Geis as a witness in the sentencing phase?
>
> A. In the sentencing phase, no.
>
> Q. Okay. Now ... did the idea to call Dr. Geis at sentencing not even occur to you or did you rule it out for some strategic reason?
>
> A. There was no strategic reason that I can recall for not calling Dr. Geis at sentencing.

The trial court overruled Vaca's motion for post-conviction relief. Vaca relies on two points on appeal. First, during the guilt phase, defense counsel was ineffective for eliciting evidence of the fourth uncharged robbery. Second, during the sentencing phase, defense counsel was ineffective for giving no

consideration to calling Dr. Geis to testify or to entering his report into evidence.

III. Analysis

A. Standard of Review

The motion court's findings are presumed correct. *Zink v. State*, 278 S.W.3d 170, 175 (Mo. banc 2009). A motion court's judgment will be overturned only when either its findings of fact or its conclusions of law are clearly erroneous. Rule 29.15(k); *Worthington v. State*, 166 S.W.3d 566, 572 (Mo. banc 2005). This Court must be left with a "definite and firm impression that a mistake has been made." *Id.*

B. Ineffective Assistance of Counsel

"To show that his counsel was ineffective, [Vaca] must demonstrate, first, that his counsel's representation 'fell below an objective standard of reasonableness.'" *Edwards v. State,* 200 S.W.3d 500, 518 (Mo. banc 2006) *quoting Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668, 687-88 (1984). Second, there must be a showing of "a reasonable probability that, but for counsel's unprofessional errors, the result of the proceeding would have been different," which is a probability "sufficient to undermine confidence in the outcome." *Id.*

C. Eliciting Evidence of the Uncharged Fourth Robbery was Reasonable Trial Strategy

Vaca contends that defense counsel's decision to enter into evidence a fourth uncharged robbery at

K.C. Collectibles was unreasonable strategy that prejudiced both his guilt and sentencing phases.

"The selection of witnesses and evidence are matters of trial strategy, virtually unchallengeable in an ineffective assistance claim." *Anderson v. State*, 196 S.W.3d 28, 37 (Mo. banc 2006); *Williams v. State*, 168 S.W.3d 433, 443 (Mo. banc 2005). "Reasonable choices of trial strategy, no matter how ill-fated they appear in hindsight, cannot serve as a basis for a claim of ineffective assistance." *State v. Johnston*, 967 S.W.2d 734, 755 (Mo. banc 1997).

Defense counsel's overall theory alleged that the State's witnesses had identified the wrong person and that another assailant had committed all the robberies. The fourth uncharged robbery was a building block to prove this. The police had recovered fingerprints from the fourth robbery location that did not match Vaca's and later determined that the robbery was an isolated incident.

Defense counsel's attempted syllogism was that the police were initially correct-- all four robberies were committed by the same person, and the unmatched fingerprints were physical evidence of Vaca's innocence. In hindsight this strategy failed, but this is not the standard for evaluating defense counsel's effectiveness.

Defense counsel was met with overwhelming evidence of Vaca's guilt. Police recovered a revolver from Vaca's apartment that ballistically matched the robbery weapon. Multiple victims were all able to identify Vaca by his distinctive lisp and physical description. The victims also identified Vaca's bicycle

as similar to the one ridden by their assailant. A bag of money was recovered from his apartment. In this bag, there was a dollar bill with a brief note regarding one of the robberies in Vaca's handwriting. Vaca initially confessed to detectives that he committed the three robberies. In the face of such compelling evidence, there were few options available for defense counsel.

As to the evidence's effect on the sentencing phase, during the Rule 29.15 hearing, defense counsel explicitly testified that in preparing for trial he contemplated strategy's risk. When counsel explicitly weighs the risks and rewards of admitting evidence during the guilt phase that might later be damaging during the sentencing phase, counsel's ultimate decision is one of trial strategy. Vaca is not entitled to post-conviction relief on this point.

D. Counsel Was Ineffective as to the Treatment of Dr. Geis' Testimony

This Court has recognized that a claim of ineffective assistance may be found when a movant can prove that "(1) trial counsel knew or should have known of the existence of the witness; (2) the witness could be located through reasonable investigation; (3) the witness would testify; and (4) the witness's testimony would have produced a viable defense." *Hutchison v. State,* 150 S.W.3d 292, 304 (Mo. banc 2004).

All the elements of *Hutchinson* are met in this case. The State concedes the first three points that Dr. Geis was known by counsel, available and willing to testify. As to the fourth element, the submission of mental health history, subject to counsel's strategic

judgment, is a viable defense during a bifurcated sentencing phase. *See Glass v. State*, 227 S.W.3d 463 (Mo. banc 2007).

As stated earlier, "the selection of witnesses and evidence are matters of trial strategy, virtually unchallengeable in an ineffective assistance claim." *Williams*, 168 S.W.3d at 443. However, this is true "[w]here counsel *has investigated possible strategies.*" *Middleton v. State*, 103 S.W.3d 726, 736 (Mo. banc 2003) (emphasis added). Here, defense counsel admitted that he gave no consideration to calling Dr. Geis and there "was no strategic reason" for not calling him.

This is not a case where counsel failed to investigate the existence of a mental illness. *See e.g. State v. Ferguson*, 20 S.W.3d 485, 509 (Mo. banc 2000); *Williams*, 168 S.W.3d at 441. Rather, defense counsel actually possessed Dr. Geis' report, and he and Dr. Geis discussed its contents. Counsel recognized problems associated with Vaca's mental condition the moment he met him in the Platte County jail. Counsel's statement in the Rule 29.11 hearing shows that he knew about the report after the trial's completion. Dr. Geis was available and willing to testify on Vaca's behalf.

Further, defense counsel was clearly apprised that this may be in issue in the jury's mind. The jury asked four questions to the judge during guilt deliberations regarding Vaca's mental state. Because defense counsel conceded that conviction was probable, he knew that strategy during the sentencing phase was vital to the representation of his client.

It is unclear why counsel did not consider whether to admit Dr. Geis' testimony. As it was counsel's first bifurcated non-capital trial, counsel may have erroneously believed the exclusion of mental health evidence during the guilt phase carried over to the sentencing phase.[3] Counsel's inaction fell below an objective standard of reasonableness. This omission, in front of *this particular jury*, undermines this Court's confidence in the sentencing phase's outcome.

While Dr. Geis' testimony and report may have helped Vaca, it may have also embittered the jury.[4] This Court has noted that counsel strategically concluding so has been precisely reasonable in previous sentencing cases.[5] As such, the holding of

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[3] "The purpose of having a separate penalty phase in non-capital trials... is to permit a broader range of evidence relevant to the appropriate punishment to be imposed." *State v. Prosser*, 186 S.W.3d 330, 333 (Mo. App. 2005). While a broader range of evidence becomes relevant during sentencing, admissibility is still subject to the trial court's discretion. Sec. 557.036.4, RSMo. Supp. 2008.

[4] Commentators have noted the double-edged nature of such evidence, finding that many jurors hold a "presumption of an absolute linkage between mental illness and dangerousness." Michael L. Perlin, *The Sanist Lives of Jurors in Death Penalty Cases: The Puzzling Role of Mitigating: Mental Disability Evidence*, 8 Notre Dame J.L. Ethics & Pub. Pol'y 239, 274 (1994).

[5] *See, e.g., Strong v. State*, 263 S.W.3d 636, 653 (Mo. banc 2008) (trial counsel's failure to call two psychological experts held effective assistance because counsel sought to show defendant as a "good man" not a mentally deranged one); *Edwards v. State*, 200 S.W.3d 500 (Mo. banc 2006) (counsel's failure to pursue introduction of defendant's Asperger's syndrome held

this case is not that counsel was ineffective for not calling Dr. Geis. Rather, this case rests on the fact that the question of whether to call Dr. Geis was never considered.

IV. Conclusion

Defense counsel must retain the flexibility to make strategic decisions regarding the evidence available and the circumstances of his or her client's actual trial. Counsel may choose to call or not call almost any type of witness or to introduce or not introduce any kind of evidence for strategic considerations. Here however, experienced defense counsel candidly admitted that, without consideration and for no strategic reason, he failed to call a mental health expert. His failure to consider was ineffective.

This Court's holding should not be construed to direct future defense counsel for Vaca to either admit or omit Dr. Geis' testimony during his new sentencing phase. Rather, what is required is that future counsel give due consideration to the question before making a strategic choice.

Vaca's trial counsel was constitutionally ineffective during the sentencing phase of trial. He is entitled to a new sentencing phase. The motion court's overruling of his motion as to the sentencing

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effective assistance because counsel sought to show defendant as a loving family person); *See also Storey v.* 175, S.W.3d 116, 144-47 (Mo. banc 2005).

phase is reversed. The judgment in all other respects is affirmed. The cause is remanded.

William Ray Price, Jr., Chief Justice

Teitelman, Russell, Wolff, Breckenridge and Stith, JJ., concur.
Fischer, J., dissents in separate opinion filed.

[314 S.W.3d 331]

[State Seal]

SUPREME COURT OF MISSOURI
en banc

MIGUEL VACA,	)	
	)	
Appellant,	)	
	)	
v.	)	No. SC90554
	)	
STATE OF MISSOURI,	)	
	)	
Respondent.	)	

DISSENTING OPINION

I respectfully dissent because the principal opinion strays from the well-settled proposition that *Strickland*[6] prejudice cannot be proven by mere speculation.

The principal opinion concludes that Vaca established prejudice because Dr. Geis's testimony *may* have helped him. The principal opinion also admits the doctor's testimony *may* have hurt Vaca. This conclusion is admittedly speculative – "While Dr. Geis' testimony and report may have helped Vaca, it may have also embittered the jury." In fact, the principal opinion does not conclude that the failure to produce mental health evidence in this case was below the standard of care, but that the

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[6] *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668, 687-88 (1984).

failure to consider whether to present mental health evidence was below the standard of care.

For purposes of demonstrating ineffective assistance of counsel, prejudice must be definite and identifiable. For example, in *State v. Kenley*, 952 S.W.2d 250, 268 (Mo. banc 1997), the movant alleged counsel was ineffective because he failed to call witnesses to testify as to his mental state at the time he committed the crime. This Court rejected his claim because the testimony the movant claimed would have changed the outcome at trial was speculative:

> Moreover, Kenley has not proven prejudice. First, as we stated in *Section II* of this opinion, the testimony of the three medical experts was conflicting and speculative. Each of the three experts had a different theory supporting why Kenley behaved the way he did on the night of the murder.

Id.

In *State v. Ferguson*, 20 S.W.3d 485, 504 (Mo. banc 2000), the movant alleged counsel was ineffective for failing to plead a *Brady* violation. This Court found the movant failed to prove prejudice because his claim was "obviously a speculative proposition" in that the undisclosed evidence would not in any way negate his guilt. *Id.*

In this case, both defense counsel and the sentencing judge, who was also the judge who overruled this post-conviction motion, knew that changing the focus to present this mental health evidence after having defended the case on the basis

of a reasonable trial strategy that Vaca was not guilty would have resulted in a harsher, not more lenient, sentence.

I also question whether the circuit court's determination that defense counsel provided ineffective assistance of counsel was clearly erroneous. The principal opinion's assumption that there "was no strategic reason" not to present this mental health evidence based solely on defense counsel's testimony ignores the fact that the circuit court is not required to believe defense counsel's testimony. Further, the principal opinion's conclusion that "defense counsel candidly admitted that, without consideration and for no strategic reason, he failed to call a mental health expert" is a mischaracterization of the testimony. Defense counsel's statement was that "[t]here was no strategic reason that I can recall for not calling Dr. Geis at sentencing."

This Court is required to give due regard to the circuit court's ability to have judged the credibility of the witnesses' testimony. Rule 84.13(d)(2). Therefore, the circuit court's finding of fact that defense "counsel pursued reasonable trial strategy regarding his concerns about the movant's mental competence" is supported by the record and certainly not clearly erroneous.

In addition, the assumption that this mental health evidence would have been admissible at the penalty phase fails to consider § 552.015, RSMo 2000, § 557.036.3, RSMo Supp. 2008, and Rule

25.05(1) (2) and (3), which may require a different result.[7]

I would affirm the motion court's overruling of Vaca's Rule 29.15 motion. Vaca has not demonstrated that the result of this proceeding would have been different; therefore, he has failed to prove *Strickland's* prejudice requirement.

Zel M. Fischer, Judge

[7] The circuit court concluded as a matter of law:

> The report trial counsel obtained from Dr. Geis concerning movant's mental status did not establish that movant was either incompetent or not guilty by reason of mental disease or defect. Movant did not suffer from a mental disease or defect that qualified as a defense under Chapter 552.

Section 552.015 provides limitations on the admissibility of mental disease or defect evidence.

NO. 10-387

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

STATE OF MISSOURI,

Petitioner,

v.

MIGUEL VACA,

Respondent.

BRIEF IN OPPOSITION
TO PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

TABLE OF CONTENTS i

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES ii

RESPONDENT'S STATEMENT OF THE CASE 1

I. Relevant Facts Surrounding the Trial and Direct Appeal 1

II. The Postconviction Case 4

REASONS THE WRIT SHOULD BE DENIED 11

I. The Missouri Supreme Court Did Not Create a New Category of Per Se Prejudice 11

II. Petitioner Misrepresents the Applicability of Cases Involving the "Double-Edged Sword" Analysis of Mitigation Evidence 23

CONCLUSION 34

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE 35

APPENDIX 36

Section 557.036, RSMo Supp. 2008 ..... A-1

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

Page

CASES:

Ake v. Oklahoma, 470 U.S. 68 (1985) 22

Barnes v. Thompson, 58 F.3d 971 (4th Cir. 1995) 28, 29

Davis v. Executive Dir. Dept. of Corr., 100 F.3d 750 (10th Cir. 1996) 31

Dowthitt v. Johnson, 230 F.3d 733 (5th Cir. 2000) 28, 29

Edwards v. State, 200 S.W.3d 500 (Mo. banc 2006) 12

Gacy v. State, 530 N.E.2d 1340 (Ill. 1988) 32

Glass v. State, 227 S.W.3d 463 (Mo. banc 2007), *cert. denied*, 543 U.S. 1058 (2005) 12-13

Gregg v. Georgia, 428 U.S. 153 (1976) 16

Hutchison v. State, 150 S.W.3d 292 (Mo. banc 2004), *cert. denied*, 546 U.S. 837 (2005) 12, 15, 16

In re Washington, 838 A.2d 87 (Vt. 2003) 32

King v. Kemna, 266 F.3d 816 (8th Cir. 2001) 30

Middleton v. State, 103 S.W.3d 726 (Mo. banc 2003) 13

Porter v. McCollum, 130 S.Ct. 447 (2009)*(per curiam)* 16

Ransom v. Johnson, 126 F.3d 716 (5th Cir. 1997) 31

Robitaille v. State, 971 So.2d 43 (Ala. Crim. App. 2005) 32

Rompilla v. Beard, 545 U.S. 374 (2005) 13, 34

Sears v. Upton, 130 S.Ct. 3259 (2010) 16-17, 20

State v. Edwards, 173 S.W.3d 384 (Mo. App. E.D. 2005) 15

State v. Kenley, 952 S.W.2d 250 (Mo. banc 1997) 26-27

State v. Link, 25 S.W.3d 136 (Mo. banc 2000) 25-26, 27

State v. Prosser, 186 S.W.3d 330 (Mo. App. E.D. 2005) 15

State v. Vaca, 204 S.W.3d 754 (Mo. App. W.D. 2006) 4

Strickland v. Washington, 466 U.S. 668 (1984) ..... passim

Tennard v. Dretke, 542 U.S. 274 (2004) 21, 34

United States v. Cronic, 466 U.S. 648 (1984) 11, 14, 21, 23

Vaca v. State, 314 S.W.3d 331 (Mo. banc 2010) ..... passim

Wiggins v. Smith, 539 U.S. 510 (2003) 34

Willacy v. State, 967 So.2d 131 (Fla. 2007) 28, 29

Williams v. State, 168 S.W.3d 433 (Mo. banc 2005) 13

Williams v. State, 254 S.W.3d 70 (Mo. App. W.D. 2008) 22-23

Wong v. Belmontes, 130 S.Ct. 383 (2009) 24-25

STATUTES:

Section 557.036, RSMo Supp. 2008 ..... 2, 15

RESPONDENT'S STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Because Petitioner has failed to include a number of relevant and probative facts which establish that trial counsel's failure to consider using mental health evidence in mitigation of punishment was unreasonable and prejudicial, and because Petitioner has distorted what the Missouri Supreme Court actually decided, Respondent presents his own statement of relevant facts.

I. Relevant Facts Surrounding the Trial and Direct Appeal

During October and November 2002, two robberies and an attempted robbery took place in the same vicinity in Kansas City. The suspect rode a bicycle and was seen fleeing toward two nearby apartment complexes. Respondent, Miguel Vaca, lived in one of the complexes. Physical evidence found in Mr. Vaca's apartment linked him to the offenses. The state charged Mr. Vaca with two counts of first degree robbery, one count of attempted first degree robbery, three counts of armed criminal action, and one count of second degree assault.

Following his arrest, Mr. Vaca was taken to the Platte County Jail, where personnel immediately recognized that he was mentally ill, and a psychiatrist prescribed anti-psychotic medications. From the beginning of their attorney-client relationship, Mr. Vaca's trial attorney, Anthony Cardarella, had concerns about Mr. Vaca's mental health.

Mr. Cardarella retained Dr. Bill Geis, Ph.D, a licensed clinical and forensic psychologist, to evaluate Mr. Vaca's competency to proceed to trial and to

determine whether Mr. Vaca had a mental disease or defect that could have impacted the commission of the alleged crimes. Dr. Geis conducted the evaluation and provided Mr. Cardarella with a report detailing his findings. Mr. Cardarella read the report and was aware of the information it contained.

Mr. Vaca's trial was one of the first times that Mr. Cardarella represented a client in a bifurcated, non-capital trial under Section 557.036, RSMo Supp. 2008.[1] Under that statute, the jury first decides the issue of guilt or innocence; if there is a guilty verdict, the case proceeds to a sentencing phase. Mr. Cardarella believed there was a strong likelihood that Mr. Vaca would be convicted and that a sentencing phase would be necessary. Mr. Cardarella planned to call family members who could testify and draw sympathy for Mr. Vaca. Mr. Cardarella did not consider calling Dr. Geis to testify at the sentencing phase and had no strategic reason for not calling Dr. Geis as a witness in the punishment phase.

At trial, Mr. Vaca testified as part of the defense case-in-chief and denied any involvement in the charged offenses. Mr. Vaca was 43 at the time of the alleged crimes. Mr. Vaca had suffered a head injury in a bicycle accident when he was 28 or 29. Mr. Vaca told the jury that he received a Social Security disability pension because he was paralyzed in the left neck and arm and had a weak right

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[1] This statute is set out in full in the Appendix.

knee. Mr. Vaca added that he had headaches and was nervous and took some medications for a "mental disorder."

Mr. Vaca's brother, Albert Vaca, testified as a defense witness in the first phase of trial that in 1988 Mr. Vaca suffered an injury which required brain surgery. After that, Mr. Vaca sometimes seemed to be nervous. Mr. Vaca's sister, Rita Vaca, testified in the first phase that Mr. Vaca had lived with her and was "on disability".

During the deliberations on the issue of guilt or innocence, the jury asked the following questions:

1) Where has Miguel been since arrested 11-2002[?]
2) Was Miguel given psychological testing[?]
3) Had he been compliant with medications before arrest[?]
4) Is he currently on meds [?]

The trial court did not answer the jury's questions. The jury convicted Mr. Vaca of all counts charged.

The sentencing phase began shortly after the jury returned the guilty verdicts. The state called five of the complaining witnesses to testify. Mr. Vaca's father was the only defense witness during the sentencing phase; he testified that Mr. Vaca had no prior felony or misdemeanor convictions and that he and his wife had only visited Mr. Vaca two times during the 45 months he was incarcerated awaiting trial.

The jury declared punishment at thirty years in prison for each of Count I, first degree robbery and Count VI, armed criminal action; life in prison for Count III, first degree robbery; ten years in prison for each of Counts II and IV, armed criminal action; fifteen years in prison for Count V, attempted first degree robbery; and seven years in prison for Count VII, assault in the second degree. The trial court sentenced Mr. Vaca to the terms recommended by the jury and ordered that the sentences run consecutively for a total of life plus 102 years in prison.

On direct appeal, the Missouri Court of Appeals, Western District, affirmed Mr. Vaca's convictions and sentences. *State v. Vaca*, 204 S.W.3d 754 (Mo. App. W.D. 2006).

II. The Postconviction Case

Mr. Vaca pursued postconviction relief on the ground that his attorney should have presented readily available evidence - of which his attorney was well-aware - of his severe mental illness, as mitigation during the sentencing phase of trial.

Mr. Vaca has a long history of schizophrenia and borderline intellectual functioning. His mental illness has prevented him from living independently or holding a full-time job. Following his arrest, he was taken to the Platte County Jail, where personnel immediately recognized that he was mentally ill and a psychiatrist evaluated Mr. Vaca and prescribed anti-psychotic medications. As

noted above, Mr. Vaca's trial attorney, Anthony Cardarella, had concerns from the outset that Mr. Vaca had mental health problems.

Before trial, Dr. Bill Geis, Ph.D., evaluated Mr. Vaca at the request of defense counsel. Dr. Geis was not called to testify at either phase of the trial. At the postconviction evidentiary hearing, Dr. Geis provided expert testimony about Mr. Vaca's mental illness. Specifically, following testing and record review, Dr. Geis diagnosed Mr. Vaca as having paranoid schizophrenia, dysthymia, post-traumatic stress disorder, and borderline intellectual functioning. On the Global Assessment of Functioning Scale, Mr. Vaca received a score of 40 on a 100-point scale, indicating limited functioning. Dr. Geis gave his opinion, to a reasonable degree of professional certainty, that Mr. Vaca suffered from these mental diseases and defects at the time of the offenses, from October through November 2002.

Regarding whether Mr. Vaca has a mental disease or defect that could have impacted the commission of the alleged crimes, Dr. Geis reported:

> The defendant has a serious mental disease – schizophrenia – that clearly could have had an impact on his ability to form rational thought and conform his behavior to the expectations of society at the time of the offense. The condition of schizophrenia is corroborated by other medical personnel and appears to have been in existence for most of his life. He also has a condition of low intelligence (borderline intellectual functioning) that could have impacted his ability to understand the impact of his actions.

Dr. Geis could not recall Mr. Cardarella asking him to testify during the sentencing phase of Mr. Vaca's trial, but he was available and willing to testify, if he had been asked to do so.

As part of his evaluation, Dr. Geis reviewed Mr. Vaca's social history and found that individuals on both sides of Mr. Vaca's family have been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. As an adult, Mr. Vaca was only able to care for himself in the most minimal way. He lived at home with his parents until he was 36 years old, had an episodic work history at menial jobs, and lived in Arizona with his brother from 1996 to 2001. He lived with his sister in Kansas City from 2001 until he was charged in the criminal case and never dated or had a girlfriend.

During an early grade at one school, Mr. Vaca poked another student with a pencil seriously enough that the school "really freaked out." Mr. Vaca was immediately removed from the school and saw his first psychiatrist after that incident. Mr. Vaca described himself as a nervous child who never felt comfortable with other children.

In 1989, at age 27, Mr. Vaca had a bicycle accident and suffered a head injury that resulted in a hematoma (blood clot) forming in his brain. Mr. Vaca underwent surgical draining to relieve pressure on the brain. This information was verified through the records of Dr. Martin Rhodes, which Mr. Cardarella had provided to Dr. Geis. Dr. Rhodes's records included a notation from December 2001 that Mr. Vaca had been diagnosed with schizophrenia while he was in

Arizona, and that he was taking Trazodone (an anti-depressant sleep medication) and Klonopin (an anti-anxiety medication). Dr. Rhodes noted that Mr. Vaca was on disability for his psychiatric problems, that Mr. Vaca did not leave his house very often, and that Mr. Vaca had "problems with routine mental function."

On March 20, 2002, Dr. Rhodes noted that Mr. Vaca appeared "depressed with what may be some delusions concerning the effects of lab drawing." On June 21, 2002, Mr. Vaca's paranoid schizophrenia appeared "worse than last visit." Mr. Vaca appeared agitated and anxious and had "looseness of association." Dr. Rhodes encouraged Mr. Vaca to see a psychiatrist.

From his mental status examination, Dr. Geis observed that Mr. Vaca appeared depressed and subdued and had trouble thinking. Mr. Vaca reported that when he first arrived at the jail, he thought he was having a "mental breakdown." Mr. Vaca told the psychiatrist at the jail that he was "seeing things and seeing people burning." Mr. Vaca reported having experiences from the past of being "slapped and beaten and whipped." Mr. Vaca reported having frequent nightmares and daytime flashbacks of bad events from the past.

Mr. Vaca reported symptoms of poor sleep, crying jags, dejection, demoralization, interpersonal withdrawal, fatigue, low motivation, and reduced pleasure. Mr. Vaca reported hearing voices and said that the voices had gotten worse since the head injury in 1989. Sometimes the voices would scream, causing him to feel agitated and terrorized.

At the time of the offenses, Mr. Vaca "did not know exactly what was going on" in his mind. He was not taking his medication, because he was having trouble with his insurance. Mr. Vaca was having "visions of people burning in fire, yelling and screaming, trying to pull me in" and recalled hearing voices that said, "go out, go out, go out," but he did not know what the voices meant. Mr. Vaca told Dr. Geis that he had no motivation for robbery, was not angry at people, and did not want to hurt anyone. Mr. Vaca said that his family and other people have told him that he is crazy.

On the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale – Revised (WAIS-R), Dr. Geis found that Mr. Vaca's Verbal IQ is 76, his Performance IQ is 72, and his Full Scale IQ is 73. The subtests for the verbal and performance scales indicated that Mr. Vaca has always operated at a lower range of intellectual functioning, consistent with other low-functioning, non-mentally retarded individuals.

Postconviction counsel provided additional records to Dr. Geis in anticipation of his testimony at the postconviction hearing. Mr. Vaca's school records showed poor performance in school, which Dr. Geis found to be consistent with Mr. Vaca's intellectual functioning assessments. Mr. Vaca attended special education classes and dropped out of school in ninth grade. Mr. Vaca's Social Security records showed that Mr. Vaca was approved to receive Social Security disability benefits after he was found to have a Verbal IQ of 69, a Performance IQ

of 65, and a Full Scale IQ of 65. These results place Mr. Vaca in the range of mental retardation and are consistent with Dr. Geis's results.

Dr. Rajiv Parikh treated Mr. Vaca from December 2000 to early 2001. Dr. Parikh noted that Mr. Vaca was extremely paranoid and suffered severe anxiety and depression. Dr. Parikh named Mr. Vaca's condition as a schizoaffective disorder, *i.e.*, schizophrenia with a depressive condition, a diagnosis functionally identical to Dr. Geis's diagnosis.

Mr. Vaca saw Dr. Susan Laningham on October 18, 2002, three days before the first charged offense. Dr. Laningham noted that Mr. Vaca reported "feeling out of control" and that he felt that he needed to start taking Klonopin again. Dr. Laningham was uncertain whether Mr. Vaca's diagnosis was schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, but she wanted him to see a psychiatrist as soon as possible. Mr. Vaca had an appointment scheduled with a psychiatrist, but it was still a few weeks away.

Dr. Geis found it significant that the jail psychiatrist put Mr. Vaca on anti-psychotic medications immediately after Mr. Vaca arrived at the Platte County Jail. This indicated that Mr. Vaca was in a psychotic state when he entered the jail. While Mr. Vaca was at the jail, the staff mistakenly reduced his medications by 50%, causing difficulty sleeping and increased auditory hallucinations. Once the mistake was discovered and the medications were increased, Mr. Vaca's symptoms became more manageable.

Dr. Geis found that Mr. Vaca was not malingering but was in a psychotic state and had a mental disease or defect before he committed the crimes. Dr. Geis testified to a reasonable degree of psychological certainty that at the time of the offenses Mr. Vaca had a serious mental disease, schizophrenia, paranoid type, which impacted his ability to form rational thought and to conform his behavior to the requirements of the law. Mr. Vaca's borderline intellectual functioning also affected his ability to understand the impact of his actions.

At the postconviction hearing, trial counsel testified that he pursued a defense of misidentification, but that he also believed there was a strong likelihood that Mr. Vaca would be convicted and that a sentencing phase would be necessary. Mr. Cardarella planned to call family members who could testify and draw sympathy for Mr. Vaca. Mr. Cardarella did not consider calling Dr. Geis to testify during the sentencing phase. Mr. Cardarella had no strategic reason for not calling Dr. Geis to testify in the sentencing phase, and stated, "I honestly didn't give that a thought. . . . I didn't analyze it from that perspective at all."

The postconviction motion court denied Mr. Vaca's motion for postconviction relief . On appeal, the Missouri Supreme Court relied on *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668 (1984), to find that trial counsel's inaction in failing to even consider whether to present Dr. Geis's testimony as mitigation evidence fell below an objective standard of reasonableness and undermined confidence in the outcome of the sentencing phase. *Vaca v. State*, 314 S.W.3d

331, 335-337 (Mo. banc 2010); *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 687-688. The Court found that counsel's failure to exercise any trial strategy or to even consider calling Dr. Geis to testify entitles Mr. Vaca to a new sentencing phase. *Id.*

REASONS THE WRIT SHOULD BE DENIED

I. The Missouri Supreme Court Did Not Create a New Category of Per Se Prejudice

Petitioner asserts that the Missouri Supreme Court has opened the door to an expansion of the *per se* prejudice rule created by *United States v. Cronic*, 466 U.S. 648 (1984), for application in limited circumstances. Petition at 8, 15-17. This is a fanciful interpretation of the Missouri Supreme Court's opinion. The state's petition is nothing more than a request for error correction, when no error occurred. In fact, the Missouri Supreme properly applied *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668 (1984), to the unique facts presented by Mr. Vaca's case.

As Petitioner concedes, the Missouri Supreme Court began its analysis of Mr. Vaca's claims by first setting forth this Court's two-part test for evaluating effectiveness of counsel under *Strickland*.[2] The Missouri Supreme Court noted, "To show that his counsel was ineffective, [Vaca] must demonstrate, first, that his counsel's representation 'fell below an objective standard of reasonableness."

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[2] *See*, Petition at 6.

Vaca, 314 S.W.3d at 335, *quoting Edwards v. State,* 200 S.W.3d 500, 518 (Mo. banc 2006), *and Strickland,* 466 U.S. at 687-688. The Missouri Supreme Court also held that "there must be a showing of 'a reasonable probability that, but for counsel's unprofessional errors, the result of the proceeding would have been different,' which is a probability 'sufficient to undermine confidence in the outcome.'" *Vaca,* 314 S.W.3d at 335, *quoting, Edwards,* 200 S.W.3d at 518; *Strickland,* 466 U.S. at 694.

The Missouri Supreme Court relied on its opinion in *Hutchison v. State,* 150 S.W.3d 292, 304 (Mo. banc 2004), *cert. denied* 546 U.S. 837 (2005), for the elements necessary to show ineffective assistance of counsel for failure to call a witness to testify at trial. *Vaca,* 314 S.W.3d at 335-336. Ineffectiveness may be found when a movant can prove that 1) trial counsel knew or should have known of the existence of the witness, 2) the witness could have been located through reasonable investigation, 3) the witness would have testified, and 4) the witness's testimony would have produced a viable defense. *Id., quoting Hutchison,* 150 S.W.3d at 304. The Court noted that the state conceded the first three requirements, in that Dr. Geis was known to defense counsel and was available and willing to testify. *Vaca,* 314 S.W.3d at 336. The Court held that submission of the mental health history, subject to counsel's strategic judgment, is a viable defense during a bifurcated sentencing phase. *Id., citing, Glass v. State,* 227

S.W.3d 463 (Mo. banc 2007), *cert. denied,* 543 U.S. 1058 (2005). *See also, e.g., Rompilla v. Beard,* 545 U.S. 374 (2005).

The Missouri Supreme Court noted that where counsel has investigated possible strategies, the selection of witnesses and evidence are matters of trial strategy and are virtually unchallengeable in an ineffective assistance claim. *Vaca,* 314 S.W.3d at 336, *quoting, Williams v. State,* 168 S.W.3d 433, 443 (Mo. banc 2005), *and Middleton v. State,* 103 S.W.3d 726, 736 (Mo. banc 2003). This is consistent with *Strickland's* admonition that counsel has a duty to make reasonable investigations or to make a reasonable decision that makes particular investigations unnecessary. *Strickland,* 466 U.S. at 691.

The Missouri Supreme Court had the authority to decide whether trial counsel acted reasonably and whether Mr. Vaca was prejudiced. The Missouri Supreme Court found that counsel readily recognized that there were problems with Mr. Vaca's mental condition, that counsel believed that conviction was probable after a trial, and that counsel knew that strategy during the sentencing phase was vital to the representation of his client. *Vaca,* 314 S.W.3d at 336. Despite having ample evidence of the mental health issues, counsel gave no strategic consideration to calling Dr. Geis to testify. *Id.*

Based on these factual findings, the Missouri Supreme Court held that counsel's inaction in failing to strategically consider whether to call Dr. Geis to testify fell below an objective standard of reasonableness. *Id.* at 336. The Court

found that this omission, under the circumstances as they existed at trial, including the questions asked by the jury, undermined the Court's confidence in the sentencing phase's outcome. *Id.*

This case is merely a fact-specific application of *Strickland*. Petitioner's real complaint is that the Missouri Supreme Court reached an outcome with which Petitioner disagrees on these facts. The claim that the Missouri Supreme Court has created a new category of *per se* prejudice is an entirely fanciful notion. The Missouri Supreme Court did not cite *Cronic* anywhere in its opinion, nor did the Missouri Supreme Court rely on *Cronic* or substitute it for *Strickland*. *Vaca*, 314 S.W.3d at 332-337. The Missouri Supreme Court simply set out the *Strickland* standard for evaluating counsel's performance, and then straightforwardly applied both parts, performance and prejudice, to the facts of Mr. Vaca's case. *Vaca*, 314 S.W.3d at 335-337. Missouri uses the same *Strickland* standard expected of any other court considering a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel for failure to call a witness.

The Missouri Supreme Court's opinion specifically stated and applied *Strickland's* articulation of prejudice, which requires no more than a reasonable probability of a different result "sufficient to undermine confidence in the outcome." *Vaca*, 314 S.W.3d at 335-337; *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 694. Inherent in the Missouri Supreme Court's discussion is the finding that a reasonable probability exists that counsel would have presented the mental health evidence, if

he had considered the possibility of using it in sentencing, and that such evidence would have affected the sentences recommended by the jury. *Vaca,* 314 S.W.3d at 335-336. That the Missouri Supreme Court did not state this finding as explicitly as Petitioner might like does not change the standard used to evaluate counsel's effectiveness. Petitioner starkly misrepresents the Missouri Supreme Court's opinion when Petitioner accuses the Missouri Supreme Court of creating a category of presumptive error.

To the extent that the Missouri Supreme Court based its analysis on rulings in prior capital appeals, *e.g., Hutchison,* 150 S.W.3d at 304, such reference was required because there are very few Missouri cases, even now, that address the bifurcated non-capital sentencing scheme set out in Section 557.036, RSMo Supp. 2008. Under that statute, evidence may be presented during the penalty phase to either support or mitigate a defendant's punishment. Section 557.036.3; *State v. Edwards,* 173 S.W.3d 384, 386 (Mo. App. E.D. 2005). That evidence may include, within the discretion of the court, evidence concerning the impact of the crime on the victim, the victim's family and others, the nature and circumstances of the offense, and the history and character of the defendant. Section 557.036.3. "The purpose of having a separate penalty phase in non-capital trials . . . is to permit a broader range of evidence relevant to the appropriate punishment to be imposed." *State v. Prosser,* 186 S.W.3d 330, 333 (Mo. App. E.D. 2005). Effective advocacy is critical under this individualized non-capital sentencing

scheme. The Missouri Supreme Court used *Hutchison* to set out the elements that a movant must prove to establish that counsel was ineffective for failing to call a certain witness to testify in the penalty phase, *Vaca*, 314 S.W.3d at 335-337, but the Court did not impose the heightened duty of investigation required of counsel in a capital proceeding. *See, e.g., Gregg v. Georgia*, 428 U.S. 153 (1976).

The Missouri Supreme Court also has not created a lower threshold of prejudice for non-capital cases. *See*, Petition at 24-26. The standard remains: A movant must prove a reasonable probability of a different result "sufficient to undermine confidence in the outcome." *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 694. The Missouri Supreme Court held that counsel cannot make a tactical decision without the requisite prior investigation and consideration of mitigation options. *Vaca*, 314 S.W.3d at 336-337. This is consistent with this Court's opinion in *Sears v. Upton*, 130 S.Ct. 3259, 3265-3266 (2010), where this Court reaffirmed the requirement that counsel conduct a constitutionally effective mitigation investigation. This Court held that a tactical decision "is a precursor to concluding that counsel has developed a 'reasonable' mitigation theory in a particular case." *Sears*, 130 S.Ct. at 3265. To assess the probability of a different outcome, courts must consider the totality of the available mitigation evidence – both that adduced at trial and later adduced in postconviction or habeas proceedings, and reweigh it against the evidence in aggravation. *Id.* at 3266, *quoting, Porter v. McCollum*, 130 S.Ct. 447, 453-454 (2009)*(per curiam)*. There is no conflict between the

standard this Court set out in *Sears* and the opinion of the Missouri Supreme Court in *Vaca*. Both *Sears* and *Vaca* are firmly rooted in the *Strickland* prejudice standard. *Sears*, 130 S.Ct. at 3265-3267; *Vaca*, 314 S.W.3d at 335-337.

Petitioner presents a strawman by accusing the Missouri Supreme Court of relying on the idiosyncracies of the particular decision-maker. Petition at 22. In so doing, the state misapplies the relevant discussion in *Strickland*, which states:

> In making the determination whether the specified errors resulted in the required prejudice, a court should presume, absent challenge to the judgment on grounds of evidentiary insufficiency, that the judge or jury acted according to law. An assessment of the likelihood of a result more favorable to the defendant must exclude the possibility of arbitrariness, whimsy, caprice, "nullification," and the like. A defendant has no entitlement to the luck of a lawless decisionmaker, even if a lawless decision cannot be reviewed. The assessment of prejudice should proceed on the assumption that the decisionmaker is reasonably, conscientiously, and impartially applying the standards that govern the decision. It should not depend on the idiosyncracies of the particular decisionmaker, such as unusual propensities toward harshness or leniency. Although these factors may actually have entered into counsel's selection of strategies and, to that limited extent, may thus affect the performance inquiry, they are irrelevant to the prejudice inquiry. Thus, evidence about the actual process of decision, if not part of the record of the proceeding under review, and evidence about, for example, a particular judge's sentencing practices, should not be considered in the prejudice determination.

466 U.S. at 694-695. Here, *Strickland* holds that the jury is presumed to have followed the instructions given by the trial court and to have reasonably, conscientiously, and impartially applied the standards that govern the jury's

decision, unless there is some evidence to impeach the process. There is no evidence that would impeach the process followed by the jury in Mr. Vaca's case.

Additionally, where "the actual process of decision" is "part of the record of the proceeding under review," then evidence about the actual decision-making process may be considered in the determination of prejudice. *Id.* A court hearing an ineffectiveness claim must consider the totality of the evidence before the judge or jury. *Id.* at 695. The jurors' inquiries about Mr. Vaca's mental health are not idiosyncratic because they were based on the evidence adduced at Mr. Vaca's trial. To whatever extent the jurors' questions come within that term as used in *Strickland*, Justice O'Connor's opinion expressly exempts the irrelevance of a decision-maker's "idiosyncracies" when they are a matter of record. 466 U.S. at 695. Thus, the Missouri Supreme Court properly took into account the four questions asked by the jury in finding that confidence in the outcome of the sentencing phase was undermined. *Vaca*, 314 S.W.3d at 336-337.

In this case, the jury heard all of the evidence, including Mr. Vaca's own testimony in the first phase of the trial, and determined on its own that Mr. Vaca has some type of mental health problems. Because the question of mental disease or defect was not presented as a defense, the trial court properly could not answer the jury's questions about Mr. Vaca's mental health. Nevertheless, the jury's questions should have served as notice to trial counsel that at least some of the jurors would consider Mr. Vaca's mental health issues as evidence in mitigation of

punishment. Reasonably competent counsel would have considered before trial whether Dr. Geis's testimony would be helpful mitigation evidence in the sentencing phase, but in the absence of such pretrial analysis, the jury's questions should have alerted counsel to that prospect.

Strickland requires the postconviction court to assess trial counsel's conduct in light of the facts and circumstances as they existed *at trial*. 466 U.S. at 690, 694-696. The Missouri Supreme Court would have violated *Strickland* if the Court had failed to consider or address the record showing that the guilt phase evidence raised questions about Mr. Vaca's mental health. The jury's questions relate both to the Court's analysis of counsel's performance under the circumstances as they existed at trial, and to the analysis of prejudice, *i.e.*, the likelihood of a different result. *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 690, 695-696.

Petitioner has argued that this Court should grant certiorari because the Missouri Supreme Court's decision "would eviscerate the prejudice requirement" for claims of ineffective assistance of counsel in non-capital sentencing proceedings and "would permit sentences to be set aside on little more than speculation." Petition at 25-26. This argument grossly misstates the Missouri Supreme Court's decision. Under *Vaca*, the prejudice requirement is alive and well. The *Vaca* opinion is based on well-documented evidence of mental illness and the lack of any strategic consideration or decision by trial counsel about whether to present such evidence in mitigation. The Missouri Supreme Court

specifically found that counsel's inaction undermined confidence in the outcome, *i.e.*, that Mr. Vaca was prejudiced by his attorney's failure to strategically consider whether to use Dr. Geis's testimony in mitigation. *Vaca*, 314 S.W. 3d at 336.

Petitioner's concern about "speculation" is unfounded. Applying the *Strickland* standard necessarily requires a reviewing court to "speculate" about the effect of new mitigating evidence, regardless of how much or how little mitigation evidence was presented during the initial penalty phase. *Sears v. Upton*, 130 S.Ct. 3259, 3266-3267. *Strickland* requires the reviewing court to take into account the newly uncovered mitigation evidence, along with the evidence already introduced, to determine whether a *reasonable probability* exists of a different sentence after a constitutionally sufficient investigation. *Sears*, 130 S.Ct. at 3267. The reviewing court is not required to determine that a different result would be *certain* to occur.

The Missouri Supreme Court's opinion only imposed on counsel the duty to examine and consider the potential mitigating evidence available to counsel and to make a strategic decision whether or not to use that evidence in the sentencing phase of a non-capital trial. *Vaca*, 314 S.W.3d at 335-337. In *Strickland*, this Court declined to list a particular set of detailed rules for counsel's conduct, because any such set of rules "would interfere with the constitutionally protected independence of counsel and restrict the wide latitude counsel must have in making tactical decisions." 466 U.S. at 688-689. Consistent with *Strickland*, the Missouri Supreme Court was careful not to interfere with trial counsel's flexibility

to make strategic decisions regarding the evidence available and the circumstances of his or her client's actual trial. *Vaca*, 314 S.W.3d at 335-337.

Strickland's recognition of the importance of counsel's independence and wide latitude in making tactical decisions also disposes of Petitioner's complaint that the Missouri Supreme Court did not require counsel at a resentencing hearing to present the mental health evidence that was not presented at the first trial. Petition at 17. Plainly, defense counsel at Mr. Vaca's first trial had available a wealth of evidence that could have been used in mitigation. Evidence of Mr. Vaca's mental illness would have gone far to explain Mr. Vaca's behavior in committing the offenses, even if counsel chose not to pursue a defense of not guilty by reason of mental disease or defect. The Missouri Supreme Court recognized the mitigating impact of this evidence and remanded precisely so that competent counsel could give that evidence the consideration that it deserves. *Vaca*, 314 S.W.3d at 336-337. *See, e.g., Tennard v. Dretke*, 542 U.S. 274, 288 (2004) ("Evidence of significantly impaired intellectual functioning" is evidence that might serve to mitigate punishment). The Missouri Supreme Court properly deferred to counsel to review the mental health evidence in the context of the case and to make the ultimate strategic decision about whether to present that evidence in the new sentencing hearing.

Petitioner's unfounded accusation that Missouri courts have declared a class of *Cronic* presumed prejudice cases gets no help from the state's

idiosyncratic anecdote about *Williams v. State*, 254 S.W.3d 70 (Mo. App. W.D. 2008).[3] That case involved an entirely different issue than this case. The question in *Williams* was whether trial counsel, a privately retained attorney, was ineffective for failing to prove his client's indigency in order to obtain funding needed to seek the opinion of an independent psychiatric expert. *Williams*, 254 S.W.3d at 73, 82-83. Williams's attorney fees had been paid by his father and he maintained that he had no additional resources to fund examinations or consultations with a psychiatrist. *Id.* at 73. The Missouri Court of Appeals, Western District, found that counsel failed to act as a reasonably competent attorney under *Strickland* when he did not follow the statutorily mandated procedures to prove that Williams was a poor person entitled to funding for expert assistance under *Ake v. Oklahoma*, 470 U.S. 68 (1985). *Williams*, 254 S.W.3d at 82-83. The appellate court remanded for a new trial. *Id.* Petitioner asserts that upon retrial, Williams's new attorney chose not to present any evidence about Williams's mental state, after determining that such testimony would not be helpful.

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[3] *Williams* arose out of the same county as Mr. Vaca's case, and both Williams's trial and Mr. Vaca's trial were prosecuted by the same prosecutor's office.

Petitioner complains that the proceedings at Williams's second trial establish that there was no error in his first trial. Petition at 16-17. Petitioner's complaint assumes that trial counsel at the first trial would have chosen the same course as counsel at the second trial. What the state ignores is that counsel at the first trial did not have the benefit of an independent mental evaluation upon which to make that decision. *Williams*, 254 S.W.3d at 82-83. The prejudice to Williams arose from first trial counsel's lack of proper investigation, which was caused by a lack of funding that resulted from counsel's ineffective assistance. *Id.* Assuming, *arguendo*, that Williams's new trial duplicated his first trial, that result does not establish the state's claim that Missouri appellate courts have expanded *Cronic* presumptive prejudice. Certiorari to this Court in Mr. Vaca's case is not justified simply because the state does not like the individual outcome in an unrelated and dissimilar trial court disposition.

II. Petitioner Misrepresents the Applicability of Cases Involving the "Double-Edged Sword" Analysis of Mitigation Evidence

To support its attack on the Missouri Supreme Court's decision, Petitioner argues that the opinion "conflicts with how this Court and other courts have handled claims of failure to present evidence that has the potential to damage the defense case," asserting that "most courts have found no prejudice from the failure to present such 'double-edged evidence.'" Petition at 18. This argument ignores or minimizes the essential element of a strategic decision about whether to use

such evidence in sentencing. Simply put, the "double-edged sword" principle at play in the cases cited by the state has no application where, as in Mr. Vaca's case, defense counsel confirms that he made no strategic decision to forego the omitted evidence. Mr. Vaca's attorney specifically testified that he had no strategic reason for not presenting the mental health evidence, and that he did not even analyze Dr. Geis's testimony "from that perspective at all."

The Missouri Supreme Court's decision poses no conflict with either Missouri case law or rulings in other jurisdictions that have upheld strategic judgments of "double-edged" evidence, a scenario the Missouri Supreme Court expressly recognized. *Vaca*, 314 S.W.3d at 336-337. Further, Petitioner's tacit claim that these cases stand for a *per se* rule of "no prejudice" from the omission of mental health evidence violates the very principles of *Strickland* that preclude the type of "*per se* prejudice" Petitioner unjustly accuses the Missouri Supreme Court of promulgating.

Petitioner relies on *Wong v. Belmontes*, 130 S.Ct. 383, 386 (2009), to support its position that there can be no prejudice from the failure to present "double-edged" mitigation evidence. That is not what this Court held. In *Wong*, the petitioner's trial attorney prepared a carefully tailored mitigation case and called nine mitigating witnesses, without opening the door to extensive evidence that the defendant had been involved in a prior, execution-style murder, about which he had boasted to several people. *Id.* at 385-386. This Court found that on

the facts of that case, the petitioner could not establish prejudice from the failure to introduce additional mitigating evidence where that additional evidence would have opened the door to much more damaging aggravating evidence. *Id.* at 385-386. Far from imposing a *per se* presumption of no prejudice, this Court reiterated *Strickland's* point that "the reviewing court must consider all the evidence – the good and the bad – when evaluating prejudice." *Id.* at 390, *citing. Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 695-696, 700.

Petitioner cites two Missouri state death penalty cases in an effort to convince this Court that Missouri has, in the past, found no prejudice from the failure to use evidence of mental illness in mitigation of punishment. Petitioner misapplies both of these cases.

In *State v. Link*, 25 S.W.3d 136, 149 (Mo. banc 2000), the defendant alleged ineffective assistance of counsel for not contacting a second mental health expert to evaluate the impact of sexual and physical abuse defendant had suffered as a child. Defense counsel informed the trial court before the penalty phase began that he had made a conscious decision, based on his experience and training and the information he had been provided about the case, not to present any psychological experts in the penalty phase. *Id.* Counsel testified at the postconviction hearing that he was aware that the testimony of his experts and of the state's experts would show that the defendant had no mental disease or defect, that the defendant was anti-social and had a fixation on having sex with young

girls, and that the defendant would repeat his criminal behavior and would kill again. *Id.* Consequently, counsel made a trial strategy decision to keep out evidence about his client's life and to not pursue or introduce psychological evidence from any source. *Id.* The Missouri Supreme Court found that presenting additional psychological evidence would have led to the state introducing devastating testimony about the defendant's state of mind and would have verified other expert opinions that the defendant was anti-social, aggressive, and a serial rapist. *Id.* On the record presented in *Link,* the Court found no reasonable probability that the jury would have come to a different result on the issue of sentencing. *Id.*

Similarly, in *State v. Kenley,* 952 S.W.2d 250, 266-269 (Mo. banc 1997), trial defense counsel testified at the postconviction hearing that she and her co-counsel consciously decided, after discussion, not to seek additional psychiatric evaluations of their client. The Missouri Supreme Court found that defense counsel made the decision not to pursue a certain line of investigation that possibly could have further damaged their client's case. *Id.* at 268. The Court noted that counsel is not obligated to shop for an expert witness who might provide more favorable testimony, and that counsel did present evidence in mitigation. *Id.* at 268-269. The Court found no reasonable probability, under the totality of the case, that the jury would have given a different sentence if additional mitigating evidence had been presented. *Id.* at 268.

Link and *Kenley* differ significantly from this case. In both cases, trial counsel investigated whether mitigation evidence existed and determined whether additional investigation was warranted. *Link*, 25 S.W.3d at 149; *Kenley*, 952 S.W.2d at 266-269. Counsel in both cases considered the impact of the possible mitigation evidence already available and made a conscious decision that additional evaluations and investigations could be detrimental. *Link*, 25 S.W.3d at 149; *Kenley*, 952 S.W.2d at 266-269. The Missouri Supreme Court in both cases examined the performance of trial counsel and reached the conclusion that additional mitigating evidence would not have made a difference in the result of the sentencing proceedings. *Link*, 25 S.W.3d at 149; *Kenley*, 952 S.W.2d at 266-269.

The Missouri Supreme Court found a very different situation in Mr. Vaca's case, focusing, as *Strickland* dictates, on the particular facts and circumstances of Mr. Vaca's trial. 466 U.S. at 695-696. Mr. Vaca's attorney had gathered information that could be used as mitigation in a bifurcated sentencing proceeding, but counsel did not even consider using that information in the sentencing phase of trial. Mr. Vaca's attorney did not consider the impact of the possible mitigation evidence he already had, and made no determination about whether additional investigation was necessary. Mr. Vaca's attorney never even approached the point of having to decide whether the benefits of the possible mitigation evidence were

outweighed by any detrimental impact it might have on the jury, because he did not analyze that evidence "from that perspective."

Other cases cited in the state's Petition address strategic decisions by counsel to forego certain mitigation evidence. In *Barnes v. Thompson*, 58 F.3d 971, 980-981 (4th Cir. 1995), trial counsel made a tactical decision to limit his investigation and to not present certain mitigating evidence because it would have been counterproductive to his trial strategy of preventing a finding of future dangerousness. In *Dowthitt v. Johnson*, 230 F.3d 733, 744-745 (5th Cir. 2000), counsel did not investigate a mental health mitigation case because his client "appeared sane and competent at all times." Additionally, counsel had obtained a psychiatric evaluation, but decided as a matter of trial strategy not to call the doctor because the doctor's position was not entirely favorable to the client and the doctor would have had to respond with more damaging information on cross-examination. 230 F.3d at 747-748. In *Willacy v. State*, 967 So.2d 131, 144 (Fla. 2007), trial counsel made a trial strategy decision to portray his client as a life worth saving, and therefore avoided putting on evidence that would have depicted him as a sociopath or psychopath and which would have opened the door to additional aggravating facts. In each of these three cases, the reviewing courts relied on the tactical decisions of trial counsel that the potential for opening the door to damaging evidence outweighed any benefit from the omitted mitigating evidence, and thus held in each case that there was no reasonable probability that

the sentencing outcome would have been different if the omitted evidence had been presented. *Barnes*, 58 F.3d at 980-981; *Dowthitt*, 230 F.3d at 745; *Willacy*, 967 So.2d at 144.

Unlike *Barnes*, *Dowthitt*, and *Willacy*, counsel in Mr. Vaca's case did not make a trial strategy decision about whether or not to call Dr. Geis to testify in the sentencing phase. Counsel did not even consider the possibility of presenting evidence to show that Mr. Vaca's actions were influenced by his long-standing mental illness, of which counsel was well-aware. Dr. Geis's testimony would not have been counterproductive to any other sentencing phase trial strategy, particularly because whatever strategy existed was very slim. The only witness called at sentencing was Mr. Vaca's father, who testified only that Mr. Vaca had no prior convictions and that he and his wife had not visited Mr. Vaca during the 45 months he was incarcerated pending trial. While it is possible that an attorney might be concerned that Mr. Vaca's mental illness would present a "double-edged sword" based on a general prejudice against evidence of mental illness, Mr. Vaca's attorney did not claim to have had that concern, nor did he omit the evidence on that basis. Notably, the evidence presented at the postconviction hearing raised no specter of opening the door to other, more damaging evidence, but simply portrayed a man with a long-standing mental illness who encountered problems with his insurance and medications, which caused him to briefly deviate from his generally peaceful and law-abiding norm.

Petitioner claims that in *King v. Kemna*, 266 F.3d 816, 825 (8th Cir. 2001), the reviewing court dismissed as "rank speculation" a claim that evidence of the defendant's diminished capacity might have persuaded the court to impose a more lenient sentence. Petition at 20. Petitioner fails to explain that in *King* 1) after two mental evaluations, there was no evidence that King had a mental health or diminished capacity defense, and 2) the trial court, in sentencing King, emphasized that he was imposing consecutive life terms because of King's criminal history, including serious violent offenses and the nature of the attack for which he was prosecuted. 266 F.3d at 824-825. The decision in *King* was based on the specific facts of that case, as required by *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at 690-691, 695-696.

Unlike *King*, Mr. Vaca's case presents a long, documented history of low intelligence and mental illness, going back to childhood, contrasted with a generally uneventful life with no history of serious violent offenses prior to the offenses charged. Mr. Vaca did not even have any prior misdemeanor or felony convictions. He had lived with his parents and siblings for his entire adult life and was on Social Security disability. A reasonable probability exists that a jury hearing about Mr. Vaca's mental health issues would not have imposed such harsh terms in prison, and the result of the sentencing hearing therefore would have been different.

In only two of the cases relied on by Petitioner, the courts analyzed the alleged mitigating evidence and found that it would have been detrimental to the defendant for counsel to have presented it at trial. In *Ransom v. Johnson,* 126 F.3d 716, 721-722 (5th Cir. 1997), the court came close to finding deficient performance on the part of counsel for failing to discover and present penalty phase evidence of the defendant's abusive upbringing, as detailed in his welfare file. The court stopped short of making such a finding, because the court found that the alleged mitigating evidence included information detrimental to the defendant which, when weighed against the evidence heard at the guilt phase, was not "of sufficient quality and force to raise a reasonable probability that, had it been presented to a jury, a life sentence would have resulted." *Ransom,* 126 F.3d at 724. In *Davis v. Executive Dir. Dept. of Corr.,* 100 F.3d 750, 760-761 (10th Cir. 1996), the alleged mitigating evidence was not strong, and all of the alleged mitigating evidence was tainted by the underlying danger that it would have revealed to the jury that the defendant had a history violence and abusive behavior that was fueled by alcohol.

Both of these cases are distinguishable from Mr. Vaca's case. Mr. Vaca's long history of mental illness dates back to his childhood. While there is some indication that Mr. Vaca may have engaged in isolated incidents of violence in the past, he had no prior misdemeanor or felony convictions of any sort and no significant history of violent behavior. Mr. Vaca had lived with family members

for his entire life and has no history of any drug or alcohol abuse. Dr. Geis did not find Mr. Vaca to be anti-social or to have a personality disorder. Dr. Geis was a sympathetic witness for Mr. Vaca and would have explained to the jury that Mr. Vaca's mental health deficits were a life-long, debilitating, naturally occurring phenomenon for which he conscientiously and repeatedly sought treatment. On balance, Dr. Geis's testimony would have been considerably more favorable than unfavorable to Mr. Vaca, and would have been of sufficient quality and force to raise a reasonable probability that it would have moved the jury to assess shorter sentences.

Similarly, the cases that do not apply a "double-edged sword" analysis do not advance Petitioner's claim. In *In re Washington,* 838 A.2d 87, 90-91 (Vt. 2003), the court found no reasonable probability that the evidence not presented would have changed the outcome of the sentencing proceeding, because the defendant would not cooperate with counsel's efforts to obtain a mental evaluation and refused to allow such evidence to be presented, based on an overriding scheme to prevent his brother from being convicted in a federal drug case. In *Robitaille v. State,* 971 So.2d 43, 70-71 (Ala. Crim. App. 2005), the defendant argued that his attorney did not present any meaningful evidence in mitigation, but the record did not show what mitigating evidence could have been presented. Finally, in *Gacy v. State,* 530 N.E.2d 1340, 1343-1345 (Ill. 1988), the record indicated to the appellate court that trial counsel made a strategic decision to rely on mitigating

evidence that had been admitted during the guilt phase, and to avoid arguing matters that were not helpful and which depicted the defendant as manipulative of others.

Here, Mr. Vaca cooperated with counsel's efforts to obtain a mental evaluation and the results of that evaluation supported using that evaluation as mitigating evidence. The record of Mr. Vaca's postconviction hearing establishes that Dr. Geis could have testified during the sentencing hearing, to a reasonable degree of psychological certainty, that at the time of the offenses Mr. Vaca had a serious mental disease, schizophrenia, paranoid type, which impacted his ability to form rational thought and to conform his behavior to the requirements of the law. Dr. Geis also could have testified that Mr. Vaca's borderline intellectual functioning affected his ability to understand the impact of his actions. Nothing in the record indicates any interference by Mr. Vaca with his attorney's ability to do his job. Mr. Vaca has established that there was substantial mitigating evidence available to counsel that would have helped to explain Mr. Vaca's behavior in committing the charged offenses.

Petitioner, as it did in the Missouri Supreme Court, seeks to mislead this Court by arguing that evidence of mental illness is such a dangerous "double-edged sword" as to be presumptively not prejudicial. The state is disingenuous in its claim that it seeks to prevent the creation of a new category of *per se* prejudice; instead, the state seeks to impose a presumption of no prejudice. Petitioner would

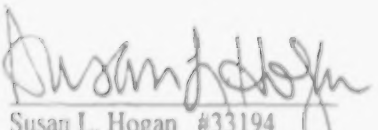
have this Court find that in any case where there are both "pros and cons" to presenting certain mitigating evidence, it is always reasonable for counsel to forego that evidence. This is an attempt by Petitioner to subvert the mitigating effect of evidence that the defendant has significantly impaired intellectual functioning, suffers from mental illness, or grew up in disadvantaged circumstances. *See, e.g., Rompilla v. Beard,* 545 U.S. 374, 390-391; *Wiggins v. Smith,* 539 U.S. 510, 535 (2003); *Tennard v. Dretke,* 542 U.S. 274, 288 (2004). The Missouri Supreme Court properly took evidence of Mr. Vaca's mental illness into account and properly applied *Strickland's* test for prejudice. This Court should reject Petitioner's attempt to impose a presumption of "no prejudice" by denying certiorari.

CONCLUSION

This Court should deny certiorari because the Missouri Supreme Court properly and straightforwardly applied the tests for both performance and prejudice, mandated by this Court in *Strickland v. Washington,* 466 U.S. 668 (1984), to the unique facts presented by Mr. Vaca's case. The Missouri Supreme Court did not create a new category of *per se* prejudice, nor did the Court lower the threshold for a finding of prejudice in a non-capital bifurcated trial. Additionally, certiorari should be denied because Petitioner seeks to impose a presumption of no prejudice in any case in which the omitted mitigating evidence

could be deemed to present both benefit and detriment for the defense. For all of the reasons stated herein, Respondent respectfully requests that this Court deny the petition for a writ of certiorari.

Respectfully submitted,



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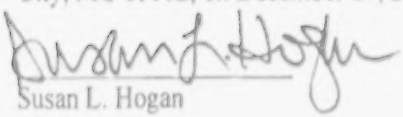
CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that a copy of the foregoing was mailed, postage prepaid to Daniel N. McPherson, Office of the Attorney General, P.O. Box 899, Jefferson City, MO 65102, on December 27, 2010.



Susan L. Hogan

APPENDIX

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section 557.036, RSMo Supp. 2008 ..... A-1 – A-3

Section 557.036, RSMO Supp. 2008

Role of court and Jury in sentencing – two stages of trial – punishment assessed by jury – when.

1. Upon a finding of guilt upon verdict or plea, the court shall decide the extent or duration of sentence or other disposition to be imposed under all the circumstances, having regard to the nature and circumstances of the offense and the history and character of the defendant and render judgment accordingly.

2. Where an offense is submitted to the jury, the trial shall proceed in two stages. At the first stage, the jury shall decide only whether the defendant is guilty or not guilty of any submitted offense. The issue of punishment shall not be submitted to the jury at the first stage.

3. If the jury at the first stage of a trial finds the defendant guilty of the submitted offense, the second stage of the trial shall proceed. The issue at the second stage of the trial shall be the punishment to be assessed and declared. Evidence supporting or mitigating punishment may be presented. Such evidence may include, within the discretion of the court, evidence concerning the impact of the crime upon the victim, the victim's family and others, the nature and circumstances of the offense, and the history and character of the defendant. Rebuttal and surrebuttal evidence may be presented. The state shall be the first to proceed. The court shall instruct the jury as to the range of punishment authorized by statute for each submitted offense. The attorneys may argue the issue of punishment to the jury, and the state shall have the right to open and close the argument. The jury shall assess and declare the punishment as authorized by statute.

4. A second stage of the trial shall not proceed and the court, and not the jury, shall assess punishment if:

(1) The defendant requests in writing, prior to voir dire, that the court assess the punishment in case of a finding of guilt; or

(2) The state pleads and proves the defendant is a prior offender, persistent offender, dangerous offender, or persistent misdemeanor offender as defined in section 558.016, RSMo, a persistent sexual offender as defined in section 558.018, RSMo, or a predatory sexual offender as defined in section 558.018, RSMo.

If the jury cannot agree on the punishment to be assessed, the court shall proceed as provided in subsection 1 of this section. If, after due deliberation by the jury, the court finds the jury cannot agree on punishment, then the court may instruct the jury that if it cannot agree on punishment that the court will assess punishment.

5. If the jury returns a verdict of guilty in the first stage and declares a term of imprisonment in the second stage, the court shall proceed as provided in subsection 1 of this section except that any term of imprisonment imposed cannot exceed the term declared by the jury unless the term declared by the jury is less than the authorized lowest term for the offense, in which event the court cannot impose a term of imprisonment greater than the lowest term provided for the offense

6. If the defendant is found to be a prior offender, persistent offender, dangerous offender or persistent misdemeanor offender as defined in section 558.016, RSMo:

(1) If he has been found guilty of an offense, the court shall proceed as provided in section 558.016, RSMo; or

(2) If he has been found guilty of a class A felony, the court may impose any sentence authorized for the class A felony.

7. The court shall not seek an advisory verdict from the jury in cases of prior offenders, persistent offenders, dangerous offenders, persistent sexual offenders or predatory sexual offenders; if an advisory verdict is rendered, the court shall not deem it advisory, but shall consider it as mere surplusage.

CREDIT(S)

(L.1977, S.B. No. 60, p. 662, § 1, eff. Jan. 1, 1979. Amended by L.1981, H.B. No. 554, p. 636, § 1; L.1990, H.B. No. 974, § A; L.1996, H.B. No. 974, § A; L.2003, S.B. No. 5, § A, eff. June 27, 2003.)

179

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Supreme Court, U.S.
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No. 10-387

IN THE

Supreme Court of the United States

STATE OF MISSOURI,
Petitioner,

v.

MIGUEL VACA,
Respondent.

On Petition For a Writ of Certiorari
To the Supreme Court of Missouri

REPLY BRIEF

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES ii

PETITIONER'S REPLY 1

1. Vaca's response advocates for the same type of per se prejudice rule that the Missouri Supreme Court effectively adopted in it's opinion 1

2. Petitioner is not attempting to impose a presumption of no prejudice from the failure to present "double-edged" mental health evidence 5

CONCLUSION 7

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

Sears v. Upton, 130 S.Ct. 3259 (2009) 3

Strickland v. Washington, 466 U.S. 668 (1984) 1, 2-3, 3 n.1

Wong v. Belmontes, 130 S. Ct. 383 (2009)..... 3

PETITIONER'S REPLY

1. Vaca's response advocates for the same type of per se prejudice rule that the Missouri Supreme Court effectively adopted in it's opinion.

The Missouri Supreme Court ordered a new jury sentencing trial for Miguel Vaca after finding that his trial counsel was ineffective for failing to consider whether to present available evidence of Vaca's mental health impairments at the original trial's sentencing phase. (Cert. Pet. App., pp. A13-A14). In issuing that order, the court failed to consider whether a reasonable probability existed that presenting that evidence would have changed the outcome of the sentencing phase. Instead, the court expressly found that the unpresented evidence could have embittered the jury, and it emphasized that counsel was not required to offer the evidence in a new sentencing proceeding, but need only consider whether or not to do so. (Cert. Pet. App., pp. A12-A13).

Vaca argues that the Missouri Supreme Court correctly applied the standard set forth by this Court in *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668 (1984) for granting relief on claims of ineffective assistance of counsel. But Vaca's argument is just as flawed as the opinion that he defends. He focuses almost entirely on *Strickland*'s performance prong and either ignores or gives short shrift to the prejudice prong. Vaca's argument, in essence, is that prejudice automatically flows from counsel's failure to make a strategic choice on whether or not to present evidence in the sentencing phase of a trial.

That is most clearly demonstrated in subpart two of Vaca's brief, which attempts to distinguish the cases cited by Petitioner on the basis that counsel in those cases made a strategic choice not to present "double-edged sword" evidence. In fact the opening paragraph of that subsection contains the following: "Simply put, the 'double-edged sword' principle at play in the cases cited by the state has no application where, as in Mr. Vaca's case, defense counsel confirms that he made no strategic decision to forego the omitted evidence." (Brf. in Opp., p. 24). That statement misses the point, as does Vaca's attempts to distinguish the cases cited in the petition. Whether counsel did or did not make a strategic decision is relevant to the performance prong of the *Strickland* standard but has no bearing on whether counsel's deficiencies resulted in prejudice.

While the Missouri Supreme Court effectively eliminated the required showing of prejudice in its analysis, Vaca misconstrues the *Strickland* standard by repeatedly conflating the performance and prejudice prongs. The court found that trial counsel failed to meet the performance prong of the *Strickland* standard by not making a strategic choice whether or not to present the mental health evidence available to him. (Cert. Pet. App., p A12). Petitioner takes no issue with that finding. But the inquiry cannot end there. *Strickland* made clear that performance and prejudice are separate inquiries and that prejudice must be affirmatively proven before relief can be granted on an ineffective assistance of counsel claim. *Strickland*, 466 U.S. at

691, 693.[1] Where the Missouri Supreme Court went wrong, and where Vaca goes wrong in his brief, is in reaching the inherent conclusion that prejudice naturally flows from counsel's failure to make a strategic decision and that a defendant in such cases need not affirmatively show the existence of a reasonable probability that the jury would have returned with a different sentence had the evidence been presented. *See Wong v. Belmontes*, 130 S. Ct. 383, 386 (2009).

While Vaca claims that the Missouri Supreme Court's decision is consistent with this Court's opinion in *Sears v. Upton*, 130 S. Ct. 3259 (2009), that opinion actually demonstrates why certiorari should be granted. This Court granted certiorari and vacated the judgment in *Sears* because the Georgia Supreme Court failed to apply the proper prejudice inquiry despite stating the proper standard from *Strickland*. *Id.* at 3261, 3264. Specifically, the Georgia court failed to consider newly discovered mitigation evidence and assess whether a reasonable probability existed that the defendant would have received a different sentence had a competent mitigation investigation been conducted. *Id.* at 3267.

The Missouri Supreme Court in this case was obligated to consider the evidence that was known to counsel but not presented at the sentencing hearing, and assess whether a reasonable probability existed that Vaca would have received a different sentence had that evidence been presented. While the court performed the first part of that analysis by

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[1] In the absence of prejudice, the reviewing court need not even consider the adequacy of counsel's performance. *Id.* at 697.

considering the evidence, it then erroneously cut the analysis short and failed to make the required finding of a reasonable probability of a different sentence had the evidence been presented. The court's conclusory statement that trial counsel's failure to consider presenting the evidence undermined confidence in the outcome is insufficient to establish prejudice in the absence of a finding of a reasonable probability of a different result had the evidence been presented.

Vaca tries to avoid the court's lack of the required prejudice finding by arguing that it was inherent in the court's decision. (Brf. in Opp., p. 14). The express language of the opinion refutes that assertion. The court stated that while the unpresented evidence could be helpful to Vaca, it might also have embittered the jury. (Cert. Pet. App., p. A12). And the court specifically directed that trial counsel did not have to attempt to admit the mental health evidence in a new sentencing proceeding, but need only consider whether or not to admit it. (Cert. Pet. App., p. A13). Those statements contradict any finding, express or inherent, that the unpresented evidence created a reasonable probability of a different sentence.

And the dissent took note of that language in finding that the majority opinion failed to apply the prejudice standard articulated in *Strickland*. The dissent correctly noted that the majority's "speculative" finding that the unpresented evidence may have helped Vaca but may also have hurt him was insufficient to prove prejudice under the standard set forth in *Strickland*. (Cert. Pet. App., p.A15). The dissent properly concluded that Vaca failed to meet the prejudice requirement because he

failed to demonstrate a reasonable probability that the result of the proceeding would have been different had the mental health evidence been presented. (Cert. Pet. App., p. A18).

2. Petitioner is not attempting to impose a presumption of no prejudice from the failure to present "double-edged" mental health evidence.

Vaca concludes his brief by accusing Petitioner of trying to create a presumption that the failure to present evidence that is double-edged in nature can never be prejudicial. That is not the case. It is entirely possible for a reviewing court to conclude after carefully reviewing the evidence that its mitigating value sufficiently outweighs its aggravating value such that a reasonable probability exists that presenting the evidence would result in a different sentence. But the Missouri Supreme Court did not make that finding. It instead granted relief despite acknowledging that counsel might not want to present the mental health evidence due to its potentially harmful nature. (Cert. Pet. App. at A12-A13). That is an improper application of *Strickland* that, while not specifically labeled as such, amounts to a finding of per se prejudice from the failure to consider presenting the evidence.

Like the Georgia Supreme Court that was reversed by this Court in *Sears*, the Missouri Supreme Court in Vaca's case stated the proper standard for determining the existence of prejudice, but wholly failed to apply that standard. For the reasons stated in the Petition for Writ of Certiorari, the Missouri Supreme Court's opinion has the

potential to set a precedent in the field of ineffective assistance of counsel claims in non-capital sentencing proceedings. That precedent is contrary to the standards set by this Court and, if followed by other courts, would lead those courts into error. Granting certiorari will ensure that future claims of ineffective assistance of counsel in non-capital sentencing proceedings are resolved consistently with this Court's precedents.

CONCLUSION

The Court should grant the petition for a writ of certiorari.

Respectfully submitted,

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